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ALAN DERING.

BY

HON. MRS. FETHERSTONHAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "KILCORRAN," "KINGSDENE," "ROBIN ADAIR."

"Rather the ground that's deep enough for graves,
Rather the stream that's strong enough for waves,
Than the loose sandy drift
Whose shifting surface cherishes no seed,
Either of any flower or any weed,
Whichever way it shift."

OWEN MEREDITH.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.



CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE 30TH HUSSARS' BALL	1
II. A WOMAN'S YEA	16
III. A MEMORY OF THE PAST	32
IV. "NON TI SCORDAR DI ME"	46
V. DINNA WAKEN SLEEPING DOGS	61
VI. "WHERE'ER I CAME I BROUGHT CALAMITY"	77
VII. GOOD-BYE	90
VIII. WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN	103
IX. BEECHWARDEN	122
X. A SUMMER MORNING	137
XI. LADY RUTHVEN'S CONQUEST	150
XII. SUNSHINE BEFORE STORM	160
XIII. THE STORM BREAKS	171
XIV. THE ROUND POND	184
XV. JUDGE NOT	199
XVI. THREE VISIONS	214
XVII. IN THE GLOAMING	227

ALAN DERING.



CHAPTER I.

THE 30TH HUSSARS' BALL.

“And peradventure had he seen her first
She might have made this and that other world
Another world
. but now
The shackles of an old love straighten'd him.”

Elaine.

MIDNIGHT had struck, and “the lamps shone o’er fair women and brave men;” for the ball given by the 30th Hussars had reached its height, and was universally acknowledged to be a most brilliant success.

Given a good floor, room, and music,

excellent champagne, courteous hosts, and pretty women, it was little wonder if this entertainment were destined for ever after to take a high place amongst the annals of such festivities; and as Alan Dering and Miss Dumaresque paused to rest for a while, turning an unheeding ear to the "Or et Azur's" entrancing notes, it needed no close observer to fathom that here could be found two of the very happiest hearts of even all the many happy ones now beating time to that gay valse tune.

Rosabel Dumaresque was the acknowledged beauty of the evening, and though her cousin's monopolising attentions of late had rather damped the ardour of sundry would-be adorers at that same damsel's shrine, still they seemed one and all to have recovered their spirits to-night, and rallied round her with renewed and ostentatious vigour.

“Have you promised *all* your dances, Rosabel?” inquired her partner, suddenly recollecting his own remissness in not having as yet secured permission from the favoured beauty to enrol his name on her card more than once.

“It serves you quite right that I *have* given them all away,” answered Rosabel, pouting. “You did not care to ask for more than one, and so I did not keep more than one for you.”

“That’s a story. What are those blanks left on every other line all down your card?”

“Well, if they are blanks,” and a merry laugh rippled forth from the beautiful red lips, “they are not reserved for you,” she said mischievously.

“That we’ll see about when the time comes. At present we will go into the tea-room and refresh our bodies and

minds by a little rest, whilst the good people here dance the 'Lancers.' "

"But I think I am engaged for them," hesitated Rosabel; "and to your Colonel, too."

"That's awkward; but still it's no reason you should not drink a cup of tea in the most deeply secluded corner we can manage to find."

"Very well;" and the conspirators departed from the ball-room with an ostentatious "we're going to return" air, which would be quite sufficient of itself to condemn them.

As they passed out they encountered a rival pair entering in to the doorway—Teddy Graham and his blonde goddess.

"Alan, I want to speak to you presently," whispered his friend as they passed each other.

"All right;" and Captain Dering won-

dered to himself what could have brought so serious an expression to Mr. Graham's cheery countenance. "The 'lout of a lord' interfering again, I suppose," he murmured, as each passed on their way.

The night wore on, and still Alan Dering devoted his time and attention most assiduously to the lovely Miss Dumaresque. Involuntarily he seemed to relinquish the idea of quiet *têtes-à-têtes*, though *why* he could scarce himself have told; but, somehow, they never seemed to have anything to say under those circumstances, and instead, they danced a sufficient number of dances with each other to cause the eyebrows of all discreet matrons to raise themselves in pained surprise, and even Teddy Graham's faith in his brother officer's anti-matrimonial precepts sank to a very low ebb indeed.

In the ball-room, surrounded with crowds, glitter, and excitement, Rosabel's beauty had an all-absorbing effect on the man so constantly beside her; but in quieter moments all seemed to vanish into thin air, and she was merely to him the pretty plaything and sweet little cousin of his earlier years once more.

The first deep tone of music which had sounded in pretty Rosabel's nature made her humbly aware of her own deficiencies in being unable to give back the re-echo of an answering chord; and so she avoided all seriousness, or what she herself called "talking grave," and gave the rein to her light merry laughter and bright girlish spirits, until Alan Dering felt himself fascinated and enthralled, not only by her marvellous loveliness, but also by her gay sweet tones.

“We’ve danced quite often enough together, I think,” she laughed merrily, “and I must do some duty dances, now, if you please !”

“Very well ; then I will go and speak to Teddy Graham, who, I believe, wants me ;” and Alan left her side with what Miss Dumaresque considered to be evidently somewhat scant regret. So she bit her rosy-red lips, and beat a “devil’s tattoo” on the floor with one little satin-shod foot, and considered herself to the last degree insulted and slighted ; consequently, one of the many other adorers, who were waiting to pick up such crumbs of kindness as fell to their share, found himself suddenly raised to quite an elevated pinnacle of most unlooked-for happiness, and the possessor of at any rate quite sufficient crumbs to make a fair-sized quartern loaf.

But vainly did his fair cousin gird inwardly at her late partner's neglect, and quite lost were the direful and indignant glances which she occasionally flashed at him, alternating with the looks of melting approval which were now being cast at her present adorer. For Captain Dering and Mr. Graham stood earnestly conversing, with apparently no thought for anything save the topic of their converse.

"I've got some bad news for you, old boy," began Teddy Graham, in so grave a voice as to make Captain Dering look up quickly, with a hasty exclamation of—

"What the devil's up now?"

"Well, don't you miss a certain young man who should have been here to-night?"

"Geoff Dumaesque?" questioned Alan, hastily.

“Exactly. And do you know *why* he is not here?”

“No; I heard to-day by chance that he had applied for a fortnight’s leave and had got it; but what of that?”

“Simply this: HE has gone off with ‘the little circus-rider’ at last!”

“Good God, what a fool!”

“Just what I think,” returned Teddy, calmly; and unable to resist the luxury of saying, “I told you so,” he added: “How about that young woman’s charming sentiments and promises *now*, my boy?”

Alan remained silent. He felt furious at the apparent deception of which he had been made the tool, and deeply hurt to think of the terrible blow which the news would prove to both the father and sister of this foolish, hot-headed boy, who had set the world and all its prejudices

so much at defiance. Would they altogether absolve himself too, he wondered, for not having warned them in time of the threatened danger? And yet he had done all that friendship could entitle him to, in a case which apparently had such slight evidence to support it.

“Who *would* trust a woman?” he said bitterly; and so savage was the glance which reached even his blue-eyed enchantress, as she twirled and pirouetted in an adjacent “Ladies’ Chain,” that the said damsel felt quite restored to good humour in thinking how dire had been the punishment inflicted by her latent encouragement of those other adoring worshippers.

“Who told you of this, Teddy? Does every one know it?”

“Not a soul as yet. The Colonel himself told me, and wished it to go no

farther at present, for the sake of Miss Dumaresque, you see."

"I think nothing can be done until to-morrow," said Alan decidedly. "Then I will try to find out every particular, and must go to my uncle and break it to him. To be on the spot might possibly save that fool of a boy from any rash vengeance which the old man might take into his head."

"I must say, you take a deal of trouble to stand in the way of your own prospects! But of course you're right, old boy, and good luck go with you!" rejoined Teddy, making off once more to where his blonde goddess sat in state, surrounded by a devoted bevy of "shawl-carriers," as Mr. Graham irreverently termed her staff of admiring satellites.

Captain Dering remained where he was for many minutes, pondering deeply over

the lately heard intelligence. Had his cousin really married this girl? and if so, when and where had the marriage taken place? These were the problems to be solved.

There was no one there to tell him of a certain little church in one of the very shabbiest and poorest parts of the great metropolis, where, more than a month ago, on three several Sabbaths running, the banns had been solemnly published between "Geoffry Haughton Dunkeld, bachelor, of —— parish, Middlesex, and Madge Lee, spinster, of Brighton, Sussex;" and where, on one dark November day, a plainly dressed young pair stood before the altar, whilst the curate in charge read out to the surrounding clerks and pew-openers, that *he* "Geoffry Haughton" was willing to take *her*, "Madge," to be his wedded wife "until death should them part."

But of this Captain Dering knew nothing, and so he could only make the wildest conjectures concerning his relative's *faux-pas*, the extent of which was lost in doubt. Still, as a vivid remembrance crossed his mind of the expression on Madge Lee's face when she had so bravely defied his doubts and questions on the first and only occasion they had ever met,—in spite of appearance, in spite of common sense, and all other praiseworthy reasons and things,—Alan Dering felt that he trusted this girl yet, in spite of all and everything. Could thoughts but travel, how dear to at least *one* proud, aching woman's heart would have been the knowledge that the self-same trust which she had so prayed for was hers, even now!

At last Captain Dering aroused himself from his meditations and bethought him

that surely he must have missed one, if not several, of the remaining dances for which his name had been written down on the beautiful Rosabel's card. Hastening to redeem his apparent neglect, he encountered that young lady herself just re-entering the ball room, and one glance at her so lately bright face, now clouded and sad, was sufficient to convince him that his unintentional rudeness had most assuredly been regarded in the light of a very capital offence indeed.

“Forgive me, Rosabel,” he whispered, taking possession of her arm in his own and leading her off with an air of proprietorship most galling to the young sub-lieutenant with whom she had just danced, and which caused muttered words of strange import to proceed from the mouth of that extinguished but smouldering junior officer.

“Come to the conservatory, dear, where it’s quiet,” said Alan kindly, “for I have something to tell you which you ought to know, which I *must* tell you.”

Rosabel’s little heart beat quick, and her rosy lips trembled woefully as she seated herself on a low sofa, shadowed over with palms and ferns, by her cousin’s side.

CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN'S YEA.

“Nay, too steep for hill-mounting;
Nay, too late for cost-counting;
This downhill path is easy, but there's no turning back.”

“ROSABEL,” began Alan Dering gravely,
“I'm afraid it's not a very pleasant thing
I have to talk to you about; but I can't
help it, dear.”

“No, oh no!”

“I can't bear to be the means of bringing pain or sorrow to your bright little heart, but I *must* speak; so forgive me, will you?”

“There's nothing to forgive,” murmured Miss Dumaresque brokenly, the

quiver in her soft voice telling of an effort at the calmness which was belied by her twitching hands and lips.

“Can she know already?” thought her cousin to himself, in great surprise, and the doubt became a certainty as Rosabel continued—

“Of course it was very wrong; and, oh! I am so sorry, Alan. But how could one know you would care?”

“I not care, Rosabel! You must be mad, child. Why, one would hate to see even an utter stranger, with whom one had no connexion, playing the fool like that!” exclaimed Alan indignantly.

No answer from Rosabel, only a suspicious trembling became visible in the averted little head; and Captain Dering continued—

“It isn’t as if there were any real strength of feeling or love to trust to;

but in such a case as this, where the acquaintance has been so short, what is one to judge by save outward appearances, and certainly *they* don't tend to give one much confidence," he added, bitterly.

But he started in untold dismay as a piteous sob burst forth from his companion's lips, and she cried out passionately—

"How could I know that you really cared for me? How could I tell that I was making you angry when those stupid boys *would* dance with me, for you never showed it the least bit; you looked as if you hardly ever saw me. Oh, Alan—dear Alan, you *must* forgive me! Now that I know you really do love me, I would go on my bended knees to show you how humbly I regret having made you angry, dear!" And a warm, clinging hand is

laid on his own, whilst hot tears of mingled sorrow and happiness roll down his young cousin's beautiful, rose-leaf face.

To accurately describe Captain Dering's feelings at this supreme moment, no words would prove sufficient. His first concise thought is, that there *are* other fools in the world besides his cousin Geoff; his second, sincere shame for this thought itself. Whether he had ever decided on ultimately marrying his pretty cousin was strongly doubtful; but that he has accepted all the devotion of her loving little heart he cannot even to himself deny; and truly the Fates have well avenged her faith in him!

Being a man of the world, he reads the girl's innocent mistake clearly enough, and loves her all the better for the glimpse which it has given him into her

soft, trusting heart. Being a gentleman, he sees but one course to pursue, and so pursues it.

“Rosabel, little darling,” he says tenderly, “it is for me to ask forgiveness, not you. But don’t let our first happy hour together be marred by even the sound of such a word as that. Let us forget as well as forgive, and remember only that we are happy now.”

Do what he will, Alan Dering’s voice was strangely unjoyous for that of an accepted bridegroom ; but what man was ever proof against tears, when the latter are shed for the *first* time? And so he puts a protecting arm round Rosabel’s mignonne figure, and draws her little fair, “fluffy” head down on to his shoulder, and tries not to wonder what people will think and say at sight of the swelled eyelids and the nose of somewhat roseate

hue, which stress of feeling has implanted on the lovely face of his inamorata.

What is this low, soft, dreamy air which the beautiful band of the 30th Hussars is doing full justice to in the ball-room far away? It steals out at the door, it comes wailing up the corridor, and pealing into the conservatory, where rest the new-found *fiancés* dreaming of happiness to come. Its low, sad notes reverberate in the heart of the man resting there, until it opens to their touch as it had not done for either a fair woman's love or tears!

Once more he sees before him the pale and noble face of the only true love his life has ever known; and as the beautiful valse tones rise and fall with slow sad rhythm, echoing in his ears like some far-off call from a spirit-land,—his mind conjures up the vision of a dark proud

head crowned with Eucharis lilies, and the steadfast look in the deep grey eyes when he told her the name of the valse, and she had said, "I shall not forget." Did she remember it still? he wondered. Where was she,—what doing?

Over his soul there swept a very agony of longing to see her once again, were it only for a moment, to clasp her hand once more, again to meet the kind true glance of her honest eyes; and a low despairing murmur of "*Mon rêve, mon rêve!*" broke forth, as Alan Dering forgot for an instant where he was, what doing, and gave himself up to the tide of past recollections which now swept over him with irresistible power.

"Yes, that is '*Mon Rêve*' which they are playing now," said Rosabel, sitting up and smoothing her pretty hair; "and I'm engaged for it, I'm afraid; and oh,

dear me, what *did* become of your Colonel and his 'Lancers!'"

"I should think he did without it," answered her cousin laughingly, trying to shake off the feeling of utter unreality which was making itself so forcible to his senses at large. "As those 'Lancers' took place about an hour ago, you can hardly wish him to be wearing the willow still, can you?"

"No, certainly not. But have we really been away so long Alan? What *will* everyone think and say?"

"Let them think, and let them say, my darling! Are you not my future wife, Rosabel?"

The girl glanced shyly up at him, but failing completely to understand his nature, she only wished he were less grave, and could feel more like herself, a very ray of sparkling, happy sunshine?

More than one significant glance certainly does greet them on their re-entrance into the ball-room, and still the same feeling of unreality clings to every thought, word, and deed in Alan Dering's mind. Like one in a dream he sees Rosabel seat herself beside Mary Graham, and notes the bright smile and blush with which she answers the latter's rather grave and questioning look. He understands and returns the kind congratulatory pressure of Mary's hand when he takes her to the carriage later on, and he observes the many half pleased, half mischievous glances cast in his direction by his friends and brother officers. Even when Teddy Graham inquires eagerly, "Have you told her?" he nods his head in vague assent, quite forgetting the real news which he had had to break to her.

And so the night wears on. The ball is over, the lights are out, the good-nights have all been said, and Alan Dering stands in his own room at last alone, trying to think over the events of the past hours. But after several fruitless efforts to arrange his thoughts clearly, and to judge deliberately of the wisdom or folly which the record of those past hours laid before him, he gives up the process with savage impatience ; and consigning the world at large, and himself in particular, to many strange and fearsome localities, he proceeds to take the only really wise step under the circumstances, and to go to bed.

A letter, lying on the table before him, catches his eye, and he takes it up. Giving a perplexed glance at the scratchy, bad handwriting, smeared with blots, and the almost illegible London postmark, he

opens and reads the missive, which is short enough :

“Don’t think worse of me than you can help, Captain Dering, though things look very, very bad, I know. But honour bright I have kept my word, and you may tell Geoff’s father and all of them that I am not his wife, so they must forgive him and love him still. Maybe a good time will come some day, but—I do not know !

“MADGE LEE.”

That self-same day a strange scene of woman’s courage, and man’s weakness is being played out to the bitter end.

It takes place in the small comfortable sitting-room of a quiet London hotel, and two actors alone are there ; one, a woman, stands leaning her arm on the marble chimney-piece, with a proud look

of unconquerable love and devotion on her face,—the other, a man, sits opposite to her in a low arm-chair, with an expression of mingled relief and shame on his own.

“I tell you it’s best so, Geoff,” and the clear decisive tones are those of Madge Lee.” “Besides, haven’t I already written so to Captain Dering? It’s too late to alter it now.”

“But it’s so d—d hard on you Madge!” says her boy-husband, in a weak irresolute voice.

“It would seem very hard to me if I were *not* your wife, Geoff!” and the fire in her dark eyes blazed up for an instant like summer lightning. But a beautiful soft look conquered the flame, as in a voice shaken by deep feeling the girl continues hurriedly: “Oh, my dear, my dear, what *would* I not do to shew you

how grateful I am to you for marrying me! Now I can stay with you, live with you, watch over you, *never* leave you, and yet can know in my heart that in doing so I sin against neither God nor man!"

"There's nothing to thank me for, Madge," and Geoffry Dumaresque's voice sounds forced and husky, like that of one who speaks the truth in spite of himself.

Surely now too late does the memory reproach him of a false part played; of banns called and of register signed it is true, but the name given and signed was that of Geoffry Haughton *Dunkeld*.

"Nothing to thank you for!" echoes Madge, crossing over and laying her hand on his shoulder. "Nothing to thank you for in that you have stood by me and loved me though all the world was against you? Aye, and far more

than that, Geoff! Is it *nothing* do you think, that such as you should marry *me*, Madge Lee?—giving me as proud a place as any lady in the land, and, above all, giving me your love and honour and respect as your true wife? Oh, Geoff, darling Geoff, isn't it a small enough sacrifice to give up my claim on the world's respect, so only I keep *yours*? What is it to me, if I let your uncle and all the world think evil of me, so it will help them to make excuse for *you*?"

Geoffrey Dumaresque answers no word, and the girl continues more quietly:

"I know they must of course hate me; and had I known earlier how wearily sore my heart would ache some day for your sake, God knows I would never have become your wife. But I knew nothing until Captain Dering spoke to me that day by the sea shore, when it was too late!"

“Yes, it is too late now,” assents her hearer slowly.

“But Geoff, it will be all right, now that I’m going to give up my claim to be recognised as your wife?” urges Madge eagerly.

“Of course it will. But Madge,” and Geoffry Dumaresque turns his head and looks up into her face with a strange expression of dawning reverence on his own, “how will you bear the slights and insults which the world may give you, and which I cannot shield you from?”

“I shall bear them bravely, as I would any torture on earth, for *your* sake, Geoff;” and the girl’s beautiful dark face is laid down on his own with a caress full of the most passionate love and tenderness.

What are the words which Geoffry Dumaresque’s good angel whispers now

in his ear—pleading for truth and honour as if for life and death?

For an instant he hesitates, but only for an instant; the next, he glances up into her face, and then lays his head down on her breast with a deep-drawn sigh of utter happiness and content. What matters truth or untruth, so long as victory is his? ”

CHAPTER III.

A MEMORY OF THE PAST.

“A love large as life, deep and changeless as death,
Lay ensheath'd : and that love, ever fretting its sheath,
The frail scabbard of life pierced and wore through and
through.

There are loves in man's life for which time can renew
All that time may destroy. Lives there are, though, in
love,

Which cling to one faith, and die with it ; nor move,
Though earthquakes may shatter the shrine.”

Lucile.

MORE than two years had passed and gone, and many a change had come and gone with them. Directly on Geoffry Dumaresque's departure had followed his sister's marriage to Alan Dering ; and, by a strange coincidence, the same newspaper which gave a long and eulogistic account of that most important and

fashionable ceremony, contained also the short and simple announcement of the death of Sir Francis Ruthven at Nice.

A little later, and death's hand touched one more victim, and John Dumaresque, of Beechwarden, was carried to his long home, "deeply and deservedly regretted."

When his son, who had been hastily summoned home from abroad in time to take his last farewell of a most kind and indulgent father, stood, by virtue of his sad right as chief mourner, beside the old man's coffin, and listened to the solemn words: "We give Thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world;" for the first time, perhaps, he realized how great in truth was his own especial cause for thanksgiving. Not a word had the old man ever heard of Madge Lee; not a syllable had been

breathed to him of his son's folly; and so he died at peace with all the world, and with his hand close in that son's clasp, and Madge Lee felt that her renunciation had not been in vain.

As soon as all things could be arranged, Geoffry Dumaresque returned once more to Italy "for just six months or so," he said vaguely, in answer to any questions from anxious friends; and his name soon died away and was forgotten, as those months sped by, and no sign of any return home was evinced by the new master of Beechwarden.

It was a hot, sultry day in May, far too hot for so early in the year, and Alan Dering turned in under the cool archway which shadows the entrance into Burlington House, with a sigh of relief at his temporary escape from Phœbus's all too scorching rays.

“It’ll be hotter still inside that Pandemonium!” groaned Captain Dering discontentedly, as his glance rested on the crowd of carriages which were “taking up” and “setting down” before the entrance of the great building containing our yearly national contributions to the fine arts.

But Alan was honestly fond of pictures, and of all classes of drawing, from the highest to the lowest; and so not even any consideration for his personal comfort could deter him from a visit to the well-covered walls of the Royal Academy.

After tacitly surrendering his pet walking-stick, though not without some misgivings as to ever beholding that treasured article again, and after slowly mounting the dark staircase which leads to the realms of art above, he at

last found himself, catalogue in hand, solemnly entering upon the business before him. “‘No. 1—Portrait of Mrs. Plantagenet Jones.’ By Jove! I hope Plantagenet Jones had a will of his own, else he must have had a rough time of it with that lady, to judge by her affable countenance!” soliloquised Captain Dering, after a careful study of the dame in question’s portraiture. “‘No. 3—The Alps, from the balcony of the Belle Vue Hotel at G——, a sketch taken after sunset.’ H’m! and after dinner too, I should say, to judge by the apparently rosy view which the artist took of life. ‘No. 4—Apollo and the Nymphs.’ Well, even in *this* weather”——

“Hulloa! Dering, who would have thought of meeting you here?” and Alan’s pictorial studies and medita-

tions were suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a genial, if somewhat boisterous, artist friend.

“Do come and act showman to me, my dear fellow,” implored Alan languidly. “This heat is trying to even the salamander-like constitution that I can boast of, and it ’ll save me a world of trouble if you’ll come with me and tell me what I *ought* to admire, though I reserve to myself the right of doing so in reality or not.”

“Well, of course you’ve seen Ansdell’s ‘Shorn Lamb, with the wind untempered,’ Mrs. Butler’s ‘Rout at Bull’s Run,’ and Poynter’s ‘Gilded Innocence,’ haven’t you? No? Then you must come at once to see those! And there are a few very charming pictures by nobody knows who, which are quite worth looking at, though the

colouring is too vivid and inharmonious, and the whole work of course crude."

Before many minutes had passed, Captain Dering was fain to confess that he had made a sad mistake in enlisting the assistance of his active and energetic friend in "doing" the pictures properly; and involuntarily he began ere long to turn an almost deaf ear to the copious flow of criticism and information which the latter dealt forth to him unmercifully and without ceasing.

"What a wonderful expression that face has!" murmured Alan *sotto voce* at last, attentively studying a half-length picture which hung in an obscure corner of one of the rooms.

"That? Oh yes, that is one of the pictures painted by 'nobody knows who,' which I told you of; only in this case one *does* know who painted it, for she

belongs to your world *par excellence*, the world of rank and fashion," returned Alan's friend, with his jolly Bohemian laugh.

The picture under discussion, obviously intended for a sketch of Joan of Arc, is, though fanciful, powerful in the extreme. The foreground consists of a bright, *riante* landscape in sunny France; and in the centre of the picture, on a low ruined wall, rests the tall upright form of the Lorrainer peasant-girl. In her hand she holds a shepherd's staff, but involuntarily she holds it as would one who grasps a sword; and on her grand, heroic face there gleams an unearthly light, "the light that never was on sea or land."

The glorious sad eyes, with their rapt, devotional expression, half woman's and half saint's, are fixed on the far-distant

horizon, where the first rays of dawn begin to show; golden bright do they appear at first, like a glorious promise of might and honour, receding in the far distance to a fierce, fiery red, which involuntarily recalls the vision of a burning stake and of a martyr's crown; and, faintly looming through that lurid colour, tower high the spires of Nôtre Dame de Rouen. Underneath the picture stand only four words: "The Dawn of Fate."

"Yes, the depths of passion and yet of asceticism in that face are simply marvellous," commented the artist, taking a critical survey of the picture which had apparently so fascinated his friend. "It gives one a rare idea of the brave, devoted, but self-sacrificed woman-hero, the 'maiden warrior' whom our countrymen 'tried as by fire!'"

“Who is the picture by?” asked Alan, unaccountably interested in that strangely pure, fanatic face.

“By the young Lady Ruthven.”

“*Who?*” and Captain Dering felt quite surprised himself at the vehemence of his sudden interest.

“Lady Ruthven. She is a young widow. I think her husband died somewhere abroad about two years ago, and she lives in London now. All the time she was abroad, and whilst in mourning, she studied painting almost night and day; but this is the first picture of hers which has ever been honoured by being hung here. It’s a picture which is full of faults, but it possesses something which to my thinking condones nearly every fault—and that is power.”

“And I fancied she could not *feel!*” muttered Alan to himself, taking one

more farewell glance at the brave, strong face of the warrior maiden, whose weird, sad eyes seemed looking and longing for the far-off future, which to her would so surely bring a deathless fame.

Absently enough did Captain Dering continue to make the round of each pictured wall, and, for once, it was from a sheer sense of duty and not one whit of pleasure that he completed his task. So much in fact had his thoughts wandered from the present, that on arriving at the end of the last room, he mechanically sauntered into the very first one once more, and was unconsciously just about to begin his tour all over again, when a hand was laid on his shoulder, and Teddy Graham's voice broke in on his meditations.

“Why, Alan, you look a bit moon-struck to-day. What's the matter, old boy?”

“Nothing,” answered Alan Dering curtly, for with him as with most men, a sentimental frame of mind invariably produced a correspondingly vile temper.

“Then for heaven’s sake don’t look so sadly cheerful, for it’s enough to give one the darkest of blues to look at your affable expression of countenance. Now, if you’d had the broiling which we poor devils had in the Long Valley this morning, you’d have some reason to look glum! It quite weighed on my spirits, so I put myself into the train for London town.”

“You don’t *look* exhausted, Teddy,” answered his brother officer laughing; “but I know that this morning was not altogether suitable for the ‘great lone land’ of the Long Valley.”

“I assure you it was worse than even you have ever seen it. The sun seemed hotter, the dust more choking, the colonel

more fussy, and my boots tighter than ever!" moaned Mr. Graham, refusing to be comforted.

"Well, forget it now, my dear boy, if you can, for we'll both have a benefit of it again on Monday. Come and look at the little house in L—— Street, which I have just taken for two months, and give me your opinion on it."

"Taken a house up here? Oh, I forgot though, you've been given leave for a bit, haven't you, after next week?"

"Yes; and as Rosabel wished to see more of her friends than she possibly could at Aldershot, you know, I thought it easier to take a house for a few weeks than to live in an hotel."

"How does Mrs. Dering like the idea of going out to India in the autumn?"

"Oh, she doesn't mind anything," answered Alan quietly, and there was

perhaps a shade of impatience in his voice as he spoke.

“Where shall we go this evening?” resumed Mr. Graham after a pause. “If it wasn’t so long and so serious I should rather like to go to the opera to-night,” he added doubtfully.

“Well, let’s go; what is it to-night?”

“Only the everlasting old ‘Trovatore’; but it’s such a comfort to know all the tunes, for you see one can feel quite at home then.”

“Yes, I see. Very well, we’ll attend at Covent Garden to-night, so that’s settled; and now, here we are at my new mansion.”

CHAPTER IV.

“NON TI SCORDAR DI ME.”

“Meanwhile, I was thinking of my first love,
As I had not been thinking of aught for years,
Till over mine eyes there began to move
Something that felt like tears.

“And I swear, as I thought of her thus, in that hour,
And of how, after all, old things were best,

* * * * *

I turned and looked. She was sitting there,
In a dim box over the stage; and drest
In the dress that I knew—with that full soft hair,
And that jasmin in her breast.

“But O the smell of that jasmin flower!
And O that music! and O the way
That voice rang out from the donjon tower
‘Non ti scordar di me,
Non ti scordar di me!’”

VERDI'S music was ringing through the house, when Captain Dering and his friend made their way, stepping dexterously over trains and toes innumerable,

to their allotted stalls. “La Diva’s” brilliant soaring voice was holding her hearers spell-bound as usual, and Made-moiselle S——’s glorious deep contralto filled up each pause like a distant clarion’s call.

For many minutes Alan Dering looked neither to the right nor to the left, but sat drinking in those exquisite tones with all the devotion of a passionate lover of music. The face of the “Joan of Arc,” which he had that day seen in the Academy, haunted him strangely still, he knew not why; and it was with a feeling of real impatience at his own folly that he aroused himself to answer his companion’s comments, as the curtain fell at last.

“There’s nothing like music to make one feel full of soul,” observed Mr. Graham, pathetically.

“There’s nothing like a good dinner—such as I’ll admit you gave us to-night, Teddy—to make one feel on good terms with all the world, my dear boy,” returned Alan, satirically.

“Now, that’s so like you, Alan! Just as I’m getting sentimental and working myself up to the proper frame of mind for a tragedy, you go and snub me,” said Mr. Graham, much injured.

But his companion neither answers nor turns his head. His eyes are steadily fixed on the stage-box nearest to them, and there is an odd look of constrained anxiety on his face.

“Teddy,” he says slowly, “can you tell me who it is that sits in the lowest box over there?” and the speaker’s head gives a slight nod towards the place mentioned, though he never once removes his gaze from the locality in question.

“Oh yes, it’s Lady Borrowdale, the biggest magnate round Grahamstown. She was the old earl’s second wife, and he left her everything—castles and country houses without end. Did you ever see such diamonds as she’s got?”

“No, no; I don’t mean her, I know her; but who is that with her, a tall woman in black, sitting almost behind the curtain, and facing this way?”

Even as he asks the question, the wearer of the black robe leans forward into the light and gives him a quiet smile of greeting, and Alan Dering and Cecil Ruthven have met again at last.

Half an hour later, Mr. Graham, much against his will, found himself seated beside the somewhat overpowering form of the Lady Borrowdale; whilst a little in the background were his friend and Lady

Ruthven, actively engaged in trying to find the broken threads of their lives to rejoin them once more.

“I don’t know how I recognised you, Lady Ruthven,” Alan was saying in his low quiet voice; “for you are much altered.”

It would not have been like Cecil to make any answer which implied a desire for complimentary speeches, and so she merely said :

“You see, I am getting on in life; I am eight-and-twenty now, and when you knew me first I was only a child, or at least a child in everything except years, perhaps.”

Could this beautiful, self-possessed woman really be the shy, proud Cecil of days gone by? Was it possible that the clear soft tones which were stealing into his mind like an intoxicating draught,

were the same which had so coldly said him “nay” long years ago? And the little white hand lying idly on her lap, was that the ideal of all his dreams, long, long ago?

Silent and perturbed he sat there, his gaze riveted on the face of the woman he had once loved so well, and with the terrible conviction growing each moment stronger in his heart that his true first love must prove his only one, for ever and aye.

Sad and solemn proceeds the music of the “Miserere,”—the clear high voice of “La Diva” ringing out like a silver bell at eventide. And as the answering notes of “A che la morte” peal forth in the tenor’s sweet full tones, Alan Dering unconsciously envies the power which music gives to breathe forth a heart’s wild sad longing in glorious,

passionate sounds that can reach to the very hearts and souls of men.

“Non ti scordar di me!” The notes ring in his ears with a strange significance. *Has* she forgotten, he wonders? But at this instant Cecil Ruthven turns and meets his eyes at last, and her own fall with a half-shy, and yet half-proud look of gladness, such as for sure he had never seen there in days gone by. But with the wild glad thought “he has *not* forgotten!” came another, driving out the first with loyal and sorrowful justice: “she does not know all, it is for me to tell her!”

He thought of pretty Rosabel, his wife, whom he had tried so honestly to honour and to cherish, but for whom his love had proved so fleeting.

(Poor little Rosabel! even now she is sitting in Mrs. Graham’s drawing-room,

entertaining that lady and her daughter with an account of the dresses and bonnets purchased by herself that day, and in which her innocent soul delights to revel, and here was an inexorable Fate advancing down on her and hers with steady relentless strides.)

But Fate was doomed to defeat this time, vanquished by a truer, purer, and higher power than its own, the might of “barren honour!”

“Lady Ruthven,” and Cecil starts at the tone of the speaker’s voice, “may I some day soon introduce you to my wife?”

“Your wife? I did not know, I had not heard;” the pleading look in the sorrowful eyes which meet her own, agitates her strangely, but she reads the meaning at once with all her usual clearness and truth, and it is in the kind

frank tone of old that she goes on to say :

“ Oh yes, I should like it very much indeed ; when can it be ? ”

“ Are you engaged to-morrow night, Lady Ruthven ? ” interposes Teddy Graham, who has overheard both the question and answer, and has drawn his own conclusions from the same ; “ if not, do dine with my mother, for Alan and his wife are coming too. I know that my mother would be so glad to get a chance of seeing you again, Lady Ruthven, for she is always talking of you, and she shall send you a note in all proper form to-morrow morning,” urges Mr. Graham, with a tact for which his brother officer blesses him most heartily in his own mind.

“ I shall be delighted to come,” says Cecil frankly. “ That is, if you are sure

I shall not prove one woman too many for the symmetry of your mother's dinner-table? ”

“ *I* can answer for my mother,” returns that long-suffering lady's much-indulged son, and so the matter is concluded.

“I have been looking at your picture to-day, Lady Ruthven, in the Academy,” said Alan Dering a little later on, when another fall of the curtain gave him a chance of further conversation.

“Yes? Wasn't it good of them to take such an amateur's picture? Do you like it? ”

“Like it! It has haunted me all day, I can't forget that girl's look. Where and how did you learn to paint such an expression on any mortal face? ”

“I don't know,” said Cecil dreamily. “I think I just thought and thought it all out, what it would be like to feel a

great heaven-sent power growing in one, and a still greater determination to brave all things in life and in death, sooner than prove disloyal to the might of that glorious power ! ”

“ You have succeeded,” answered Alan, in the short concise words of one who feels that asseverations are not needed.

“ Not to my own satisfaction. In faces, as in most other things, I suppose, we all have our ideal, and we all fail to reach it ! ”

The deep tone of sadness in which she spoke was surely little like the Cecil Ruthven of days gone by ; it unconsciously revealed the secret of yet another soul’s search for “ the blue rose,” which is as uncontrollable as it is vain.

“ Where do you live in town ? May I come and see you ? ” was Alan Dering’s

sole response ; intuitively he read the longing for kindly sympathy, which had caused that almost bitter *cri de cœur* to break forth.

“In C—— Street, I have a small house of my own there. But I work very hard at my painting, and am often at Kensington for whole days together, copying heads and figures in the Gallery there, as studies.”

“Then you must let me know when I *shall* find you at home, Lady Ruthven ; for I am not anxious to stop short at depositing a little piece of pasteboard at your door.”

Cecil laughed, and promised in course of time to appoint an hour when she should be at home, and as the opera was about concluded, Captain Dering and his friend proceeded to escort the two ladies down the crowded staircase to their carriage.

As many a glance of unconcealed admiration was levelled at the tall, graceful figure, and beautiful high-bred face of the young Lady Ruthven, Alan Dering felt his soul thrill painfully with the thought, that to any one of those careless hearts she might some day be all in all, whereas to his tenderly-loving and sorrowing one she must for ever be a stranger.

“Well, Alan, I hope you think I did my duty to-night,” grumbled Teddy, savagely, as arm-in-arm they pursued their way together. “Another time, if I am expected to make one of a ‘*partie carrée*,’ I hope you’ll provide me with some one a little more entertaining to devote myself to. Lady Borrowdale has her good points I’ve no doubt; but she’s as ugly as sin, and not *half* so pleasant!” wound up Mr. Graham aggrievedly.

“Cheer up, Teddy. Everything has gone wrong with you to-day, I think. Why, man, there’s many a worse world than this one of ours!” and Alan laughed out gaily.

“It’s not the world itself, it’s the people *in* it that annoy me,” answered Mr. Graham, philosophically. “But *you’re* in rare good spirits to-night, my boy,” he added, looking critically at his friend’s usually quiet face.

“Yes; I feel a little off my head, I think;” and Alan laughed as lightly as most gamblers do when playing for the highest stakes.

“Take care that you don’t *lose* your head,” said Teddy Graham, with quiet significance, standing still on the steps of the club to give more force to his words. “Alan, it’s no business of mine, I know, but there are women and women

in this world ; some, one remembers for about a week,—but some, one remembers for many a year ! Now let's have a brandy and soda."

CHAPTER V.

DINNA WAKEN SLEEPING DOGS.

“However, when I reflect upon this woman, I do not know whether in the main I am the worse for having loved her: whenever she is recalled to my imagination, my youth returns, and I feel a forgotten warmth in all my veins. This affliction in my life has streaked all my conduct with a softness, of which I should otherwise have been incapable. It is owing, perhaps, to this dear image in my heart, that I am apt to relent, that I easily forgive, and that many desirable things are grown into my temper, which I should not have arrived at by better motives than the thought of being one day hers. I am pretty well satisfied such a passion as I have had is never well cured.”—*Spectator*.

“LADY RUTHVEN,” was announced in solemn tones, to the large assembly gathered together under Mr. Graham’s hospitable roof on the following night, and many curious eyes were turned in the direction of the new arrival.

Mary Graham, advancing cordially to greet her, felt profoundly struck with the change which a few years of life had wrought in the unsophisticated maiden "of the North Countrie," whom she so well remembered coming to her first party at Grahamstown House, now so long time ago.

Cecil Ruthven never wore colours, but she had given up wearing positive mourning, and her pure white dress, with no ornaments save one large diamond star at the throat, suited singularly well with the pale face, dark hair, and deep grey eyes of the wearer.

"Oh, yes, indeed, I do remember Grahamstown, and all your kindness to me there!" said Cecil, heartily, in answer to Miss Graham's cordial welcome; and then she stood there for a minute, the unconscious centre of interest to every-

one, acknowledging each fresh introduction with a graceful and courteous smile, and shaking hands brightly with old Mr. Graham and his granddaughters, who clustered round her.

“Mrs. Dering—Lady Ruthven,” said Mary Graham’s voice in introduction, and Cecil found herself face to face with Rosabel.

Her first impression was one of profound admiration for Mrs. Dering’s perfection of pink-and-white loveliness, set off as it was by the delicate pale blue shade of one of her most bewitching toilettes; the next instant she seemed to read through and through the vapid inanity of poor little Rosabel’s mind and character, and a soft look of pity stole over her face as she frankly extended her hand to her new acquaintance, with the courteous words :

“Your husband and myself are old friends, Mrs. Dering, so I hope you will some day consider me the same?”

And Rosabel lost her heart then and there to the beautiful new-found friend, and forthwith presented her with all the trust and respect of her kindly shallow little soul, a trust which was destined never hereafter to be shaken, for verily was it founded upon a rock.

Alan found himself sitting opposite to Cecil at dinner, and in spite of the attentions expected *of* him on one side by a languid beauty, and paid *to* him on the other by “*une jolie laide*,” he found many opportunities of listening to the conversation of his *vis-à-vis*.

After all, she seemed the Cecil of olden days once more; frank and true in speech, kindly and courteous in manner, and withal, a face which embodied the

ideal of time-honoured words: "sans peur et sans reproche."

"She is a woman who would make a rare friend," thought Alan, watching how her face changed and strong earnestness of purpose crept into her eyes as she spoke with Mr. Graham of the "dreams forgone," and "deeds forborne," such as the daily records of each newspaper so often bring forth.

And as he so thought, a bright vision crossed his mind of a future, in which this woman should share all his thoughts and feelings, should guide him, strengthen him, help him to redeem his hitherto idle and wasted life, and be unto him the guardian angel of which he had so often vaguely dreamed. But would this be for *her* good? And yet, save when the words "*non ti scordar di me*" had seemed to call up an answering tenderness for one

instant into the far-away grey eyes (that instant ere she knew *all*), he could not certainly call to mind any wise or potent reason why Cecil Ruthven should wish to gainsay him her friendship.

And so, when dinner was over, and the superior and inferior sex werè once more gathered together, he adroitly established himself on a sofa beside Lady Ruthven, and ere long they were talking merrily and happily of Ercildoun and old Davie and Janet; or conjuring up reminiscences of Cecil's first appearance in society, on that never-to-be-forgotten day of the garden party at Grahamstown House.

"You are not so much altered since those days as I at first thought, Lady Ruthven," said her companion.

"No? And yet I *must* have altered a good deal too," answered Cecil quietly.

"Why so?"

“Have I not lived my life out?” responded Lady Ruthven gravely.

“No! People think so sometimes, when they feel down in their luck, or lonely and sorrowful perhaps; but it’s not true. It is only those who may never look on sunshine again that have the right to feel they have lived out their lives, and to cry out that utter darkness covereth all.”

“But how can any one tell, when the sun has set and sunk below the sea, whether it ever in this world may rise again?”

“One can’t tell for certain, but all the laws of nature, philosophy, and common sense make one *believe* that it will.”

Cecil was gravely dreaming and pondering over his words, and her thoughts had wandered to the past. Truly her married life had been a great failure.

The “*puir delicate boy*” soon degenerated into a fretful and selfish invalid, with whose heart and mind she had no thought or feeling in common. And so, ere long, the little love there ever had been was merged into a deep and profound pity ; and though no more patient or kinder nurse could have been found on the face of the earth, than the true and faithful wife who tended young Sir Francis Ruthven through the last few years of his ill-fated existence, it were impossible to deny that the depth and strength of loving which such a nature as Cecil’s was capable of feeling, had never for one single instant been awakened in her heart.

Her companion continued speaking :

“For some of us in this world, the sun may rise again in all his glory ; for many, it *can* but set ! ”

The tone of the speaker's voice, more than his words, perhaps, unconsciously told that here was another searcher after the

“blue flower, which Brahmins say
Blooms nowhere but in Paradise,”

and Cecil's kind heart was instantly touched, and in her low, clear voice she said:

“Do you remember my once telling you in my young, rash ignorance, that ‘there must be *life* hidden somewhere in the world, and it should not be wasted?’ I have become a sadder and a wiser woman since then, but I hold to the old faith still. Have you not a profession to work at, and many interests in life to work for? So long as this is the case, your life is one to be envied.”

“Envied! Well, perhaps, Lady Ruthven,” answered Alan quietly. Then,

after a slight pause, he looked up at her with the question : “ I want to ask you a great favour, may I ? ”

“ Of course.”

“ May I come and talk to you sometimes, quietly and as a friend ? I don’t think I am a ‘ society man,’ or of much good in a crowd at the best of times ; but if it will not bore you too much, I should like to come and be lectured over my indolence and all other crimes by *you* ? In fact I’ll invent fresh ones for the pleasure of having them exorcised, if you will consent ? ”

“ Of course I’ll consent,” laughed Cecil, and added honestly : “ I also should like *you* for a friend, because we’re such old acquaintances, and you are about the only person left in the world who can talk to me of Ercildoun and the past life there.”

“ You don’t regret that life, surely? You speak almost as if you did.”

“ I wouldn’t dare say so to any one else, for they’d think me crazy, but I *do* regret it sometimes. I don’t mean to say that it wasn’t miserably lonely, and those long cold winters, when I couldn’t live out of doors, were inexpressibly dreary perhaps; but, I don’t know how it is, *that* life seemed ‘life’ to me far more than this one—this is ‘existence.’ ”

“ You’d hate it now, though, if you had to live that life again. Perhaps the secret lay in the fact that *then* you knew no better.”

“ I dare say that was it,” agreed Lady Ruthven frankly. “ But if ever I am ill, or lie awake at night (not that this happens often, for I work too hard), I seem to be haunted by the cry of the sea-birds, and the thundering of each wave on the

rocks, as they resounded night and day under the windows of the great hall at Ercildoun, don't you remember? I can never get that sound out of my ears, somehow."

As she spoke in her dreamy low voice, her hearer's fancy conjured up a vision of that grand old ruined "castle by the sea," on its spray-covered cliff, and with wreaths of mist and sea-fog shrouding its gloomy turrets, as he had last seen it on the morning of his departure from Ercildoun, and involuntarily he exclaimed,

"No; it's not a place to be very easily forgotten!"

Cecil looked pleased, and said eagerly: "If you too can understand this, you may imagine how its memory must cling to me, who lived there nearly all my life!"

"Yes, I can. But surely you are happier here, Lady Ruthven, with thou-

sands of friends and many pleasures, than you could have felt there, where you had neither? I know you too well to think that these alone could satisfy a nature with such energy as yours; but even work, your painting for instance, all this is also to be had in your present life."

"Work! Ah yes, there you are right. My painting is all in all to me; but *friends*, who are one's friends?"

"I should have thought that you had only too many," said Alan, half bitterly.

"Indeed I have not. I have many acquaintances whom I am very fond of, and very kind and good they are to me too; but the fact that they would perhaps do me any 'good turn' they could, just as surely as I should do the same to them, does not constitute what in my mind is friendship."

"Tell me your ideal of it."

“ Briefly this: nothing but unlimited trust. Half the friendships of the world are broken by simple want of faith; and where there is often found endless pity, love, admiration, or sympathy, there still too often lacks faith.”

“ Faith gets broken, sometimes ! ”

“ The faith of lovers may, but never that of *friends*,” said Cecil in her clear decisive voice. “ Jealousy, coldness, pride, fickleness, all these may come between us and our heart’s ideal; but real true friends should, like Gallio, ‘ care for none of those things.’ ”

“ You rank friendship higher than love or any other feeling, then ? ”

“ Yes,” answered Cecil slowly; “ I think I do. If one *cared* very much about anybody, and they did the same, you see it would be so easy to make sacrifices for them and to forgive all their

faults, for one would get the same in return, all fair. But any day one may be called upon to do all this for a friend and yet to receive no thanks, and often to know oneself even quite forgotten."

"You speak sadly, Lady Ruthven; I should have thought that any one you honoured with your friendship would scarcely prove to have a short memory." And Teddy Graham's words came back vividly to Alan's mind, when he had said, 'some women one remembers for a week, and some for many a year.'"

"True enough," he thought inwardly, and then said: "I quite agree with you in all you've said as to that much abused feeling called friendship, Lady Ruthven. I, too, think that it stands highest of all in some ways, for where there is no passion, there is no unrest; where there is no love, there should be no jealousy;

and where there is a thorough and yet unexacting faith, there can be no broken vows. Well, will you promise me, Lady Ruthven, that if ever I can prove myself worthy of being your friend, you will try me ? ”

“ I will try you now,” answered Cecil quickly, and then hesitated, as if about to say more, when Mary Graham came up to them with some photographs of Grahamstown and its surrounding scenery, for her visitors’ inspection, and no more was said. Only when later on Alan Dering escorted Cecil to her carriage he simply remarked—

“ I shall claim your promise soon, Lady Ruthven, so I hope you will not forget it.”

CHAPTER VI.

“ WHERE’ER I CAME I BROUGHT CALAMITY.”

“ Since all that I can ever do for thee
Is to do nothing, this my prayer must be,
That thou may’st never guess or see
The all-endured this nothing-done costs me.”

The Last Wish.

SEVERAL weeks passed, and the Derings were still in town, Alan running down occasionally to Aldershot when a stern fate called upon him to remember his duties as a soldier.

Rosabel was in the seventh heaven of bliss, and inspected and purchased garments and millinery of every description throughout the livelong day. The impending departure to India of her hus-

band's regiment gave her an extra excuse for a careful selection of "outfit;" and the patience of Lady Ruthven, to whom she had taken a strong fancy, and of even good-tempered Mary Graham, was often sorely taxed to preserve an unflagging interest in the narrative of each fresh acquisition to her wardrobe.

And yet Rosabel was so soft and pretty, and so charming, that no one had the heart to gainsay her the sympathy and applause she craved; least of all young Lady Ruthven, who, to her kindly liking for the little soft-hearted soul, added a most genuine admiration for her marvellous pink-and-white loveliness.

She had also drawn a rough portrait of Mrs. Dering, which pleased that little lady much, for she saw herself etherealised therein into a positive dream of beauty. The large and somewhat vacant blue

eyes had been deepened and brightened by skilful touches of the painter's brush ; the beautiful complexion had full justice done unto it ; and the crisp, " fluffy " hair had been artistically reduced into a crown of soft golden braids, the whole completed by a fanciful dress of cloudy grey and white. One day it was destined to take its place in a certain picture on which most of Cecil's time and interest was at present centred—an artist's realization of Tennyson's " Dream of Fair Women "—and Rosabel's sweet face was to be immortalized on canvas as

—"that Rosamond, whom men call fair,
If what I was I be."

In spite of the quiet life which Lady Ruthven led, generally working or studying hard at the occupation which to her was now almost a profession, Alan Dering saw more of her than is the fate of most friends during the London season.

By dint of carefully avoiding those hours when he felt sure that a conclave of visitors would be assembled in Lady Ruthven's cool, shady drawing-room, he was perforce admitted by virtue of old acquaintance to her far hotter and decidedly more uncomfortable painting-room ; and many an hour he spent there talking to her whilst she worked on steadily, never once lifting her eyes from her easel, and therefore perfectly ignorant of the unconsciously steady observance which her visitor took of each change of expression on her ever-varying face. Now grave, now gay, now bright, now tired, now laughing, now sad ; there was no single look on that face which Alan Dering had not learnt by heart ; and yet, with that strange soul-blindness so often to be observed where the heart's innermost depths have been sounded, he

honestly thought that what he felt for this woman was true friendship alone, whereas it was in reality love so pure and full of reverence, that scarce any earthly passion was as yet mingled with it; and so his eyes were blinded that he could not see the rock on to which his ship was drifting.

There are only two sorts of love in this world; one, light, and gay, and transient, and much the happiest, but which ends as all such things end, in either bitterness and loss of respect on both sides, or else in a careless indifference which redeems nothing; the other, strong and deep and lasting, able from sheer truth and strength to forgive and forget when wanted, and to see gold instead of glitter through the might of the old faith.

To Cecil Ruthven, also, the danger was all invisible. Her frank, independent

nature made her naturally less subservient to *les convenances* than many a more worldly woman would have been ; and to her the friendship of an old friend seemed simply a matter of course, even though that friend had once upon a time tried to turn this friendship into love. But Cecil was one of those women who can sometimes forget their beauty, their power over mankind, and even their vanity, and try to prove attractive and pleasant companions for the simple pleasure of knowing that they are so. She was conscious, too, that the last few years had done much in forming and bringing out what powers nature might have granted to her ; for let the mind be whose it may, it cannot but be strengthened, though it *must* be saddened, by intercourse with the world.

Conversing with clever men or women

is like the whetstone which polishes the steel; the quality of the metal is already there, its shape may be beyond all praise, but it serves to sharpen and to smooth the steel, and so render the whole work more perfect.

Therefore, Lady Ruthven accepted in all honesty and earnestness the position of Alan Dering's friend and oftentimes companion, especially as Rosabel too made her her confidante to a far greater extent than even her husband did, and many a friendly evening did all three spend together at each other's houses. But the Derings' sojourn in town had almost come to an end now, and Cecil too ere long was going to the north for several weeks, with the Grahams; so already the half melancholy pleasure of "last days" had begun to shed a chastened shadow over each happy hour.

Captain Dering happened on one of these days to be lunching with some friends living in the South Kensington district, and whilst he was there, a discussion arose anent the painter of some picture exhibited in a certain Gallery close by. Some said it was by Jones, others said by Robinson, whilst the most ignorant, and therefore the most obstinate *connoisseur* there, swore to its being the work of that rising young artist, Brown.

“It’s only a step to the Gallery, let’s go and see it for ourselves,” suggested the wisest and most energetic of the party, and so a straggling start was effected, and without quite knowing how, Alan found himself straying with the rest into the dingy and rather cheerless rooms apportioned to art in the — Gallery.

Being fond of pictures, he devoted his

attention for some time exclusively to the walls, and with careful courtesy tried not to interrupt the work of the sundry artists who were here and there engaged in copying some especial painting.

As he stepped backwards, with his eyes fixed on a picture that had been most unkindly "skied" almost out of reach of human eyesight, the sound of a weary little sigh which seemed strangely familiar, caught his ear, and looking hastily round he saw Cecil Ruthven standing before an easel, and studying attentively the picture on it, quite unconscious of his own or any one else's observation.

Her hat was pushed back from her forehead, leaving the pale, clear-cut face fully exposed to view, and a vexed, disappointed expression was on it as she glanced from her easel to the wall and back again many times, beating an im-

patient tattoo with the obviously offending paint-brush.

Alan Dering watched her for long, but she neither moved nor turned her head, save to take a cursory glance at the party of whom were his late companions, and whose somewhat noisy remarks and criticisms only served to deepen the look of vexation on her expressive face.

“You look perplexed, Lady Ruthven,” and Cecil started at the sound of Alan’s familiar but unexpected voice.

Could he feel otherwise than rejoiced as he noted the {sudden brightening of her face, and the frank look of joy in her eyes as she exclaimed—

“Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come! I’ve been working and working all the morning, and have just arrived at the stage of being thoroughly disheartened with my work, and [perhaps you can help me.”

"What is it?" asked Alan, watching her face and not the picture as he spoke.

"Well, it's a sketch I am making for the principal figure in my picture, 'The Dream,' you know." Alan nodded; did he not know by heart each subject of interest to hers? "And I thought I could idealise that lovely face on the wall there, into hers who said of herself,

"I had great beauty: ask thou not my name:

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Where'er I came

I brought calamity."

"And so you *have*, Lady Ruthven," answered Alan, turning his attention at last to her picture; "that's the most unearthly loveliness I ever saw, and one which I could easily imagine might 'bring calamity.'"

"Do you really like it? Oh, I'm so glad," exclaimed Cecil, eagerly. "You

see, I had looked and looked at it so often and so long, that I couldn't make out at last whether the face itself had grown idiotic or whether I had ! ”

“Then I should say it was quite time that you gave up painting for to-day, and went home,” answered Captain Dering decisively. “Really, one would think you were working to support a whole tribe of aged and bedridden parents, to see the way you devote all your energies to daubing on canvas.”

“Now don't scold me ;” and Cecil's sweet smile softened his indignation in a moment ; and he watched her gather up her brushes and paints, and prepare for departure, with the strange dumb fascination of a dog as it watches each movement of its best loved friend on earth.

“I'll get you a cab, or is your

brougham coming for you?" asked Alan as they proceeded to leave the room.

"Oh, the brougham will be here; at least I ordered it at half-past three. Yes, there it is, so good-bye until this evening; you and Rosabel dine with me you know?"

"I shan't forget."

"And I feel so grateful to you for having sent me home happy, and with renewed faith in the realisation of my 'Dream,' " she said laughingly.

"I only spoke the truth." And as Alan lifted his hat to her, when the carriage rolled away from the door, he murmured sadly to himself, "your 'dream' is more likely to be realised than *mine* can ever be. Oh God! how it haunts me still—'*mon rêve, mon rêve!*' "

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD-BYE.

“I may be worse than friends would prove.

Who knows the worst of any man?

But, whatsoe’er it be, my love

Is not what they conceive, nor can.”

One Morning.

“Let me thank you for that which ennobled regret,

When it came, as it beautified hope ere it fled,—

The love I once felt for you. True, it is dead,

But it is not corrupted.”

Lucile.

“You left us all nicely in the lurch, Captain Dering, at the —— Gallery yesterday!” and Alan found himself confronted in the park next morning by a member of the previous day’s party.

The speaker was one of those women whom every one feels bound to turn and

stare at by virtue of her somewhat *prononcé* style of dressing, and her own vivid colouring, slightly embellished by art, but whom no human being of refined taste could seriously have admired. For, as a defeated but more patrician rival once sarcastically said of her, “if Nature had sat up all night to do it, she could never have made that young woman a lady.”

Captain Dering did the only thing to be done under the circumstances, and tried hard to hint that *he* had felt the aggrieved party, and the one who was “left out in the cold.”

“No, no, that won’t do. We all saw you talking to a mysterious female in black, whom you escorted out of the room with as much solemnity as if she were a princess. Now, tell me who it was?”

In addition to a decided and most cordial dislike to his questioner, Alan Dering felt a positive loathing against mentioning Cecil's name in any conversation of this sort; but he knew the woman he had to deal with too well to make any mystery about so simple a matter, as the faintest suspicion of any other woman being attractive besides herself would, he knew, be like a firebrand thrown on her overweening and jealous vanity. So he merely answered, "It was an old friend of mine, a Lady Ruthven, who painted that picture of Joan of Arc in this year's Academy, you know."

"No, I don't know. Oh, she's an artist then?" And apparently this fact proved a very uninteresting one to the fair speaker, or else the unconcealed glances of admiration levelled at her by

the “golden youths” leaning over the rails, proved *more* interesting, for to Alan’s great relief she dropped the subject apparently satisfied, and he was allowed to proceed on his way unmolested.

But the words so lightly spoken had taken root; the ordinary chatter of society had struck home where it was scarcely meant, and to Alan Dering lay suddenly revealed the undeniable fact, that the dream of his youth was also the dream of his manhood, and that his first love would be his last, let Fate do what it might.

He thought over the past few weeks, the events of each day, and the dreams of each night; the quiet and perfect happiness of those hours which were spent beside her, the wasted excitement and feverish unrest of those which were

spent apart. He could feel that the life he had lately been living had not done him much good, morally or physically; but that was no fault of hers, no fault of any one's save the goddess Fortune. (Perhaps it shewed kindness on the part of the ancients to represent that same goddess as blind, for at least she was spared from witnessing the many wrongs and sorrows wrought in her name!) And India, too. A separation of many months stared him in the face ere long; how should he, how *could* he, live without her? Never to meet her bright smile, never to clasp her hand, never to hear her voice for long weary years! How was it to be borne, how even *lived* through?

Alan Dering had woke up to a sense of his danger at last, and he tried to look it bravely in the face. There could be no doubt that to leave England as

soon as possible was the wisest course to pursue under the circumstances, in fact the only right one ; but knowing her to be heart-free, feeling sure that the bitterest pang *her* heart could know would, undoubtedly, be parting with her friend and companion, made him hesitate, and finally resolve to bear any torture on earth sooner than rob her of even the smallest pleasure which it was in his power to afford her.

She was happy and heart-whole ; then what need to think of *him* ? How should she know that from henceforth each kind word or smile would be a torture like unto that of Tantalus' cup to this man ?

“ God knows I would do far more than that for her if I could,” thought Alan to himself, with the reckless, unselfish generosity of a love which is deep and true enough to count no cost.

“ My dear fellow, this is the third time I’ve spoken to you, and nothing but a dig in the ribs with my umbrella is left to me now ! ” and the speaker suited action to word.

“ I beg your pardon, Teddy, but my wits were wool-gathering, I suppose.”

“ That’s a way they have of late,” observed Teddy, drily. “ Well, when’s your leave up, and when do you re-join us parboiled mortals at Aldershot ? ”

“ To-morrow. I sha’n’t get much of that Pandemonium though, for we’ll be sent to Colchester soon, ‘ previous to embarkation for India,’ as the papers say.”

“ *Ahemned* good job too, else there’d be very little of me left, I can tell you, if I had to disport myself much longer in that anti-heaven yclept the Long Valley.”

“ It’s a turn of luck for both of us that

Hamilton doesn't want to go to India, and has sent in his papers."

"Yes, you'll be a 'bould major' then, and I shall be a proud 'captain.' I've ordered extra suits of clothes at my tailors' already, on the strength of it. Tailors are good fellows, really, if you take 'em the right way!" added Mr. Graham in a burst of enthusiasm. "I'm sure I hope they'll get a Promised Land some day, for at present they get a deal more of 'promises' than anything more substantial."

That evening, the last evening they were all to spend in company for many a weary day, Alan Dering, for the first time in his life, felt distraught and ill at ease in the society of Lady Ruthven. Since he had discovered the secret of his own reckless folly it seemed to him almost impossible but what every one else should

discover it too ; and therefore he naturally ran into the opposite extreme, and was so cold and reserved in demeanour that Cecil's frank eyes opened wide in astonishment at last, and her laughing challenge of his being in "the most indigo of blues" was made in a half-vexed spirit of disappointment at the unusual taciturnity of her generally so pleasant companion.

"I *do* think that as this is our last evening all together you might help me to make it a recollection of brightness, and not of dullness," she said entreatingly, in a low voice, under cover of Mary Graham's brilliant fantasia on "Scotch Airs" in the distance.

Ah ! how often do we unconsciously make others "pull the chestnuts from the fire," unheedingly and unthinkingly, and it is only when some day our own

hands are sadly burnt and scarred, that the memory strikes home to us of what they too must have suffered !

“ I am sorry, Lady Ruthven, if I am assisting to spoil the festive spirit of your last dinner-party ; but, somehow, I do feel a bit down in my luck to-night, I'll confess it to *you*. ‘ Last nights ’ are never very cheery things, do you think ? ”

“ Oh, no ; ” and Alan, as he watched her, felt an unreasonable joy at the deep and grave regret in the far-away grey eyes, which accompanied Cecil's answer.

“ But I shall see you before you sail ? ” she asked eagerly. “ Rosabel says she *must* come to town the week before, just for a few last ‘ shoppings, ’ ” added Lady Ruthven, smilingly.

“ Of course she must. No, this won't be quite ‘ good-bye ’ yet, ” answered Alan slowly, like one in a dream.

“Well, that is to be in November, isn’t it? I shall be in town then too, for my long holiday will be over and I shall be anxious enough to get to work again.”

“I envy you your work. It will bring you occupation, triumph, even forgetfulness;” and there was a tone of pain in the man’s voice that struck to Cecil’s heart.

“And you, too,” she said quickly; “you will have plenty of work, and change of scene, and change of faces. It is true that I have had a small share of success in my way, which may be the promise of more to come in the future; but *that* doesn’t bring perfect happiness. Else, why should laurels taste bitter?”

She spoke in the low dreamy tone he liked best, for a careful observation had assured him that unconsciously it was

never used save when speaking to himself.

At this moment Rosabel claimed her hostess's attention to settle some trifling dispute with regard to a colour, and the minutes flew by, and the time of farewell arrived without Alan Dering exchanging another syllable with her.

The Derings were to leave town early next morning, and many were the last words and injunctions given and exchanged between Rosabel and Lady Ruthven, with regard to their next short meeting in the autumn, ere the gallant 30th Hussars would leave their native shores for India's coral strands.

Mrs. Graham and her daughter are surrounding Rosabel at the last minute, for these three are not to meet again, and Alan crosses hastily over to where Lady Ruthven stands somewhat in the

background, delicately afraid of being in the way of those affectionate and kind-hearted relatives.

“Cecil,” and his voice sounds forced and unfamiliar, “I *must* thank you for all you have been to me, have done for me. In giving me your friendship, your companionship, so frankly and truly, you unconsciously exorcised a madder devil than man was ever yet possessed of. I cannot explain or say more, I can only say, ‘God bless you, dear, now and ever!’”

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

“ ‘But may there not be
 A friendship yet hallowed between you and me ?
 May we not be yet friends—friends the dearest ?’
 ‘Alas !’

She replied, ‘for one moment, perchance, did it pass
 Through my own heart, that dream which for ever hath
 brought

To those who indulge it in innocent thought,
 So fatal and evil a waking. But, no ;
 For in lives such as ours are, the Dream-tree would grow
 On the borders of Hades : beyond it, what lies ?

To your eyes, friend of mine, and to your eyes alone,
 That now long-faded page of my life hath been shown,
 Which recorded my heart’s birth, and death, as you know,
 Many years since, how many ! A few months ago
 I seem’d reading it backward, that page ! Why explain
 Whence or how ? The old dream of my life rose again.
 The old superstition, the idol of old !
 It is over.

* * * * *

I bury it here by the sea
 Which will bear me anon far away from the shore,
 Of a land which my footsteps shall visit no more.
 And a heart’s *requiescat* I write on that grave.’”

Lucile.

NOVEMBER has come, and to one person in this world it seems as if the end of all things had come with it.

Strangers say that Alan Dering looks worried and ill, but Rosabel sees it not, and only answers pettishly, "so like people to try and make a man think he's ill, before he ever tries the climate even!"

But great and serious was her dismay when one day her husband gravely broached to her the possibility of his exchanging, and not going out to India after all; for Rosabel had set her little heart on the life of flattery, admiration, indolence, and comfort, which she felt sure awaited her on those far-off eastern shores.

"Not go to India? Not go out at all?" and tears rolled down the lovely pink-and-white cheeks copiously. They

had arrived in town the night before, and were breakfasting previous to Mrs. Dering's final raids on dressmakers and outfitters in general.

Alan did not answer. His bad angel had got the best of him at last, and he was conscious of but one wild desire left on earth, *i.e.*, *never* to leave the land where dwelt the one and only love of his life.

"And to think of all my thin clothes, trimmed with real lace too; how am I to wear *them* in this detestable climate? Oh, it's too hard, Alan; what can you be doing it for?"

"I hate going, now that it comes to the point," he said shortly.

"But you must have some *reason*?" persisted his wife not unnaturally.

"None, save what I tell you." Truly he had no reason for his folly!

From tears Mrs. Dering changed abruptly to hot indignation.

“I shall go to Cecil at once, and tell her what you say! I’m sure she’ll agree with me as regards your folly.”

“Of course she will,” answered her husband, quietly and sadly.

“But then why do it, Alan, if you yourself think it is folly? Listen to me. I know I’m not clever, and never can give any one good advice, but go to Cecil, *do* go to Cecil, and see what *she* says,” urged Rosabel, with tearful persistence.

“I will, if you wish it;” and inwardly he thought grimly how little likely was such an expedient to have the desired result.

“Well, when will you go?” asked Mrs. Dering, with feverish impatience.

“I can’t go till five o’clock this after-

noon, for the chief wants me, I think, until then."

"Well, I shall go and see her at once," said Rosabel, complainingly; "and I hope that by the time you *do* come, she will be better able to persuade you to do your duty than I am!" And a fresh remembrance of the lovely ethereal trousseau prepared for those hot eastern climes, added a tenfold pang to her aggrieved spirit as she departed indignantly on her errand.

Vaguely and wearily did Alan Dering struggle through the manifold duties of that day; never before had his colonel seemed so fussy and exacting; never had he himself felt less capable of understanding the simplest subject. Everything resolved itself in his mind into two momentous facts—that once more he should meet Cecil before the day was

done, and that then and there he must make up his mind either never to see her again, or never to leave her.

At last he was free; and, quite forgetting that he himself had stated five o'clock as the earliest hour when he should make his appearance at Lady Ruthven's house, he started off for there at once, and received a positive shock of astonishment when the servant who opened the door calmly said, "Not at home," to his first inquiry.

But being a well-known visitor, some further information was vouchsafed to him in the words—

"Her ladyship left word that she'd be at home for certain by five; and I believe, sir, she's gone to Kensington."

"Of course, to the —— Gallery, no doubt;" and Captain Dering sprang into a hansom and ordered himself to be driven to that locality at once.

The first person he encountered at the entrance was Lady Ruthven herself, and her joyful exclamation, "Oh, I am so glad to see you," gave him time to recover himself and to answer with discreet indifference.

"I was going home, for Rosabel told me you were coming to see me at five o'clock, and it's got so dark I can't see to paint any longer."

She spoke both fast and nervously, two very unusual things with Cecil, and it was with a strange feeling of warding off some unknown pain that she proposed to him to walk home to her house, instead of both driving.

"I've a weakness for walking in London through a gaslit fog," she said, trying to speak lightly, as they made their way into the park by Prince's Gate. But Alan scarcely answered, and long

and pre-occupied silences took the place of the usual steady flow of talk which these two friends had, as a rule, maintained.

At last Lady Ruthven's house is reached, and both the firelight and pleasantly shaded lamp look bright and cheerful after the gloom and fog outside.

Not so the faces of those who now sit facing that fire-light, each one wondering how soon the other will broach the important subject.

“ You saw Rosabel this morning ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And she told you of my change of determination as regards going out to India ? ”

“ Yes ; but I cannot see *why* you should change your mind ? ”

He looks keenly at her, but troubled

as her face appears, her eyes are as clear and true as a child's.

“Then I will tell you;” and Alan Dering draws a deep breath, then goes on speaking steadily: “I don't want to leave England, because there is but one human being to me on earth, and *she* lives there. Cecil, Cecil, are you so blind as not to have seen it all along? And yet, why should you, for was I myself not equally blind? How could I tell that the love I felt for you long years ago would come back to me now tenfold, nay, a thousand-fold stronger than before? Oh, my darling! my *darling*! I cannot live without you! I cannot toil through all the long weary days and hours alone, without your dear eyes to strengthen and help me. I cannot! Oh, God, I *cannot*!”

A deathly silence reigns throughout

the room, save for the flicker of the flames, and the monotonous "tick-tack" of Cecil's little French clock. A still more deathly silence reigns over Cecil Ruthven's soul, for at last she knows full well the meaning of that strange and dreary ache at her heart, which she has felt through all the past months; at last she realises the sorrow and unutterable despair of the words, "too late!"

And *he*, too. Before all things she must think of him! It was true enough that her influence over him was very great; how best could it be used—by forsaking him, or staying by him? Truly, there are some natures over whom the power of good has sometimes a stronger temptation than the power of evil; natures which are as proof against the assaults of sin and temptation, as a

strong calm rock, which throws back the sea-foam that dashes vainly against it, but which may yet go down before the power of a great faith and love, or an unselfish dread of dealing pain to others.

There is one strong desperate struggle in her soul, the struggle between happiness and misery, right and wrong; between strength and honour, and a woman's love and weakness; then, the strong high sense of honour which breathed forth in every fibre of her nature asserts itself, the old nature wakes up again at the first call of pain or trial, and the woman of the world is as stern in her uncompromising justice to her own faults, as the wild uncultured girl was great in her unselfishness and savage honour so long ago.

“It is all my fault, Alan, not yours;”

and her voice sounds strange and hoarse, and unlike itself, nor will her eyes meet his. "I ought to have thought of it, I ought to have seen the danger, but I was so happy that I did not."

"Hush ! I will not hear you reproach yourself for what is only *my* wild folly. How could you tell that each light word or smile of yours sank into my heart like an ineffaceable record ? Cecil, you can guess, if you do not know, at the dreariness of my life, the loneliness of my heart, the weary suffering of each day and hour. Only let me breathe the same air as you do, meet you sometimes in the crowd, clasp your hand as a friend, and I am content ; aye, more than content !"

"It cannot be." And something in that stern, but most ineffably sad voice, recalls to Alan's mind an old man's prophecy long years ago : "My daughter

is a Ruthven, and will aye be true to her troth."

"It is easy for *you* to say so," bursts out her listener in hollow, despairing tones. "You never heeded, you never cared, years ago, when you scorned and rejected me, though I loved you so truly, so dearly! Why should you care more *now*, when I have only the self-same love to offer you which I gave you *then*, true and loyal to you at least, if to nothing else on earth."

Did she not care? What means the trembling of body and soul, the agonized longing of a breaking woman's heart to tell the truth, and the awful temptation to say "Yes" where honour to God and man compel her to say "No"? Sometimes one may wonder, *will* there ever be a mete reward for all the pain suffered on earth? for it must surely be

a stupendous one if it can drown all remembrance of the agony which went before !

“ You are right, I do not care ; ” an involuntary shiver runs through the speaker’s voice, but each word is slow and distinct ; “ so don’t waste a thought on me. Remember, you have your life and all its duties before you. Remember that there is a future as well as a past. Forget this wild folly of to-night, and let us be the true good friends we always have been. Oh, Alan, dear Alan, do go away and live out your life happily and truly, with no thought of me, for what can *I* bring to you now save sorrow and suffering ? ”

“ Sorrow ! suffering ! *Those* are household words in my life *now* ! ”

“ Why exchange a sorrow which has been wrestled with in many a sore strife,

and has been conquered and trodden under foot, for a sorrow the height and depth and strength of which you know not, and cannot know?"

"I should be near *you*," is the man's only answer.

Two sentences from a book which she had read that day rise before Cecil Ruthven's mind, and sound in her ears like some prophetic spirit's mutterings: "Dans tes bras je perds le sens de tout, même l'honneur!" and the steadfast answer: "N'importe, je m'en souviendrais pour toi."

If *she* prove weak now, what chance is there for *him*? What hope here and hereafter? What shadow of happiness in all days to come?

"Alan, it must be, dear. There is no other course for us save to say good-bye."

"How *can* I say it, when it means

death in life to me? My darling, were it for *your* happiness you were pleading, then indeed would I listen. But what does it hurt *you* if I choose to throw away my life in worshipping an old dream?"

Cecil starts and turns round abruptly, facing him at last.

"Alan, if I told you that it was for *my* good, for *my* peace's sake that I wished you to go away, would you do it?"

The honest eyes meet his as trustingly as of old, but the world of loyal love and faith in them almost unman him.

"What do you mean; what is it, Cecil?" he falters.

"I *do* 'care' Alan; God alone knows how much! Now, will you go away, for my sake, to help *me*?"

"Yes, so help me God!"

Solemnly are the words spoken which

sound a death knell to Alan Dering's heart, and with a feeling of unutterable reverence and love he takes the small white hand in his which he has coveted so long, and draws her gently towards him.

“Good-bye, Cecil; good-bye, my only love on earth, my first love and my last. You have conquered, child, and I will do all you tell me now. I would face years and years of endless torture here and hereafter, for the sake of knowing that at least you love me at the last! Cecil, I feel I ought to pray that you may forget me, but I *cannot*. Oh, God, but it is hard to give you up!”

“It is hard, bitterly hard;” and a low moan breaks forth from the girl's white set lips; “but, Alan, it is *right*; we must ask no more. Will you promise me one thing only?”

“Anything on this earth.”

“I won’t ask you to forget me ; natures such as yours and mine cannot forget. But I *do* ask you for my sake to live a true and loyal life, and never to despair. Will you do this ? ”

“I’ll try.”

“And now, good-bye.” Her strength was failing her fast she felt ; it must be got over soon.

“Good-bye,” he answered mechanically, and in a strange hoarse voice ; then, as he reached the door, he turned and came back hastily, took both her hands in his, and brushed her forehead with his lips in a caress which was like a mute farewell to love, life, all things ; then, the sound of a closing door rings in Cecil’s fast deafening ears, and with a low wail of sorrow the conqueror in that hour of strife falls on her knees, with face hidden

in her hands, trying vainly to realize the price at which that victory has been gained, and the sorrow which no future years will ever efface from out her heart.

CHAPTER IX.

BEECHWARDEN.

“A man’s first care should be to avoid the reproaches of his own heart; his next, to escape the censures of the world.”
—ADDISON.

“If you break your plaything yourself, dear,
Don’t you cry for it all the same?”

“Is this home at last?” and the speaker’s bright gipsy face lit up with excitement as the carriage, which had been sent to the station to meet Geoffry Dumaresque and his wife, turned in under the old stone archway, grim and grey, which commanded the entrance into Beechwarden.

“It’s strange, Geoff, but I seem to remember this place!” exclaimed Madge,

with a sudden and superstitious shiver, as she glanced up at the massive stonework above her head. The arms of the Dumaresques and the Derings looked down more impassively than ever, in calm contempt at this storming of their stronghold by a nameless waif and stray; and the girl's wistful gaze had something strangely beseeching in it, as she glanced up at those time-honoured monuments of pride of birth, almost as if imploring their forgiveness.

"You *can't* have seen it, Madge," answered Geoffry pettishly. "What in the world should take you to Beechwarden?"

"Nothing. Unless I had passed it by travelling," answered Madge hesitatingly. Those days of yore were a most uncongenial subject to Geoffry Dumaresque's mind.

“Nonsense. Why can’t you let those past days alone, Madge? You’re always thinking of them, and you know how I hate their very remembrance! Try to forget them in those of the present.”

Madge Lee did not answer, but looked out into the fast gathering darkness with a weary feeling of disappointment in her heart; so many illusions had been dispelled lately, so many a golden dream turned to grey. Was this long anticipated “home coming” to prove a failure too?

Above the roll of the carriage wheels and the tramp of horses’ hoofs resounded dreary rustling and whispering amongst the branches of the old beech trees all around, and to the gipsy girl’s wild superstitious nature, there seemed almost a sound of warning in that low sad moaning.

But all fears and all ills seemed to have vanished as if by magic, when a few hours later the travellers found themselves seated at dinner in the cosy little "breakfast room" of the mansion, considered more befitting to a *tête-à-tête* entertainment than the huge, oak-panelled dining room which was used on state occasions. Both were in the best of spirits, blest with youth, health, and strength, and each apparently fully satisfied with the other; what more could any young couple want? And yet there was an expression on Geoffry Dumasresque's face now which had not been there before, a *deeper* look than his weak and vacillating features had once worn, but, withal, a sadder look too.

As he passes his slight thin hand lovingly over his wife's dark hair, whilst she kneels beside him in the firelight, it

needs no great power of observation to fathom that the love which the boy so rashly ventured in the folly and hot haste of youth, has strengthened, not weakened, as the years went on ; and that the one true deep chord in Geoffry Dumaresque's weak and facile nature is his passionate devotion to the girl he calls his wife.

What would he not give *now* to undo the past, to dare to claim the love of his life honourably and nobly as a man should, to shield that slight form against the storms and tempests of a weary world ? And yet he, her most loved and trusted friend on earth, has proved himself her bitterest enemy ; and there is no chance of retrieving past errors now !

Well may Geoffry Dumaresque dread the inevitable discovery of the truth which the light of each day may per-

force bring forth, and small wonder is it that his wife's bright hopeful words, when speaking of the future and all its joys to come, should make his heart sink within him, and his spirit to quail in utter and impotent despair.

“ If it were not for the child, I should not care so much,” he said to his own feeble, miserable heart. “ But when that is born, she *must* know all, and then, God help us both ! ”

“ Geoff, dear, you look tired and badly to-night,” says a sweet low voice anxiously ; and laying one arm around his neck, Madge rests her little dark head on his shoulder lovingly.

“ It's nothing, Madge. I suppose one does get a bit tired after travelling so long ; and I haven't been here for so many years that it makes one *think* a bit, somehow.”

"Yes, I quite understand," says the girl quickly and sympathetically.

"And I don't know how it is, but I seem to feel the loss of the good old man who is gone, more to-night than I ever did before. I wish to God I hadn't vexed and crossed him as often as I did, in days gone by;" and the tardily repentant son stares moodily into the fire with sad and anxious gaze.

"But Geoff," pleads the loving voice beside him once more, "you never vexed him much dear, you never did anything *really* bad except when you married me, and *he* never knew that I was your wife." Do what she will, a tinge of sadness and regret creeps into the girl's voice.

"You don't repent your sacrifice, Madge?"

"*Never!* It was a little enough price

to pay for what it bought. But why talk of all that now, Geoff? Aren't all the dark days over? and isn't my 'good time' coming at last?" And with a tearful laugh of deep happiness, Madge lays her head against his knee and kisses the slender, effeminate hand which lies carelessly on it.

"Poor little woman! It doesn't take much to make you happy, Madge," says her lover, tenderly.

"Not *much*," re-echoes Madge, lifting up her head now and speaking with fast and passionate utterance. "I tell you it is just 'life' itself which you have given me, Geoff, and without you I would sooner die! But don't let's talk of dying, dear, for we are both young, and there is no fear of that yet a bit, unless," and the girl's voice becomes hushed and low, "I

may chance to die when my baby is born."

Geoffry Dumaresque's heart stood still with fear and dread. How could he realize a life without *her* in it?—and yet how could he drown the voice crying out in his innermost soul with impotent anguish, " 'Twere best so ! "

" Madge, don't talk of such things, dear," he says huskily, and involuntarily drawing that dear head nearer to him, in vain protection against the relentless Nemesis which is pursuing him in thought both night and day.

" Well, I won't, dear boy," answers Madge brightly and caressingly. " Suppose you tell me something about your own people, Geoff, for, maybe, I shall know them soon now, you see."

Geoffry stirs uneasily in his chair, and then answers absently—

“Oh, I’ve only got one sister, and no other relation in the world scarcely, save her husband.”

“And who is he?”

“You know him. Alan Dering.”

“Captain Dering! Oh, did your sister marry *him*? I am so glad, for now he’ll know all about me, and will know, too, that I kept my word to him true enough, for all that I seemed so wicked and bad.”

The girl’s face is rendered gloriously beautiful by its expression of radiant and proud satisfaction now; but the man beside her seems to take little heed of its surpassing beauty, nor does he even seem to hear the triumphant ring in the clear, low voice.

“And is there no one else?” she continues eagerly. “I know your people won’t like me at first, Geoff, dear, but perhaps they will some day, don’t you

think?" and the loving brown eyes plead timidly for their imagined and long-coveted rights.

"Perhaps," answers young Mr. Dumas-resque shortly.

"He evidently feels sure that they *never* will," thinks the girl sadly in her own heart. "Well, so long as I have *him*, what does all else matter?" and it is with a sunny and untroubled mien that Madge pursues her questionings. "Whose house did you say that was which we passed just before arriving here?—that pretty little cottage, with a stream running at the foot of the garden?"

"You mean Riverside, as it is called. That belongs to young Lady Ruthven, I believe, but she has always let it for the fishing ever since it became hers at her husband's death."

“I’m sorry. ‘Young Lady Ruthven’ sounds like some one who would be a nice friend,” says Madge with speculative frankness. A friend to *her*? Where would *she* find a friend of any sort to give her a kind hand-clasp or even a friendly greeting?

“I’ve heard that she is very charming,” says Geoffry Dumaresque absently.

For a long time there is a deep silence, then Madge speaks again :

“Geoff! I have a great favour to ask of you, a *very* great one.”

“Speak out, dear,” and he smiles at her gravely anxious face.

“There was a girl in our troupe, I mean in our company, you know,” and Madge blushes hotly as she sees a frown gather on her young husband’s face, “who was a great friend of mine, and I should so like to see her again,” says Madge, wistfully.

“ Well ? ”

“ And I should so much like to ask her to stay with me some day, if I might. She’s as good and honest and true as the day, Geoff, and she nursed me once when I was very bad with fever, and oh, she was so kind to me ! ”

“ That may be ; but you can show your gratitude to her in some other way. By giving her a handsome present for instance, or something of that sort.”

“ Give her a *present* ! ” and the dark, gipsy eyes blazed with indignant fire. “ How could any present this world might give, equal what she gave me ? No ; let me ask her to come and see my grand home—to share my bright days, even as she shared my dark ones, and let her know that Madge Lee never forgets old kindnesses, even though she may be so proud and happy that there seems

scarce room in her heart for any other joy save her own."

"Well, well, let it be as you like, Madge," answers Geoffry Dumaresque, unwilling, but still half conquered by the beauty of the imploring face raised so eagerly to his own.

"Oh, thank you again and again, dear Geoff!" she exclaims delightedly. "It seems just like a beautiful fairy tale," she pursues more soberly and with a grave reflective face; "to think that I shall be able at last to return the kindnesses of others, and brighten their lives by sharing with them a bit of my own bright glory;" and the girl laughs aloud from pure joy and gladness, as she revels in the blissful thoughts which her mind has conjured up.

But the ring of that clear, joyous laugh seems to sound as a knell in the ears of

Geoffry Dumaresque ; for he starts up with a troubled countenance and proposes to shew his companion anything and everything on which his perturbed mind can lay hold as an excuse, and so the dangerous conversation drifts safely over this time, and the hand of Fate is stayed for a while.

CHAPTER X.

A SUMMER MORNING.

"The woman who loves should, indeed,
 Be the friend of the man that she loves. She should heed
 Not her selfish and often mistaken desires,
 But his interest, whose fate her own interest inspires;
 And, rather than seek to allure, for her sake,
 His life down the turbulent, fanciful wake
 Of impossible destinies, use all her art
 That his place in the world find its place in her heart."

Lucile.

On this occasion Mr. Geoffrey Dumaresque made a mistake, when he gave it as his opinion that the pretty cottage known to the neighbourhood in general as Riverside, was let to strangers. That it was ordinarily so let was true, but at the present time the late tenant having taken his departure, and a new one not yet

having been found, Lady Ruthven herself was in occupance of the pretty mansion, and enjoying country air and country life to the full, after the wearily hot London season had drawn to a close.

To a casual observer there was little change in the pale earnest face which now looked out on the bright August sunshine, as its owner stood in the rose-covered porch of the cottage this summer morning, trying to solve the important problem where and how the next few hours of idleness should be spent. But a change there was, and a great one too, though no stranger's eye might mark it; for the change lay deep down in the woman's very heart and soul.

For days and weeks after her last parting with Alan Dering had Cecil striven nobly to fight down all dangerous memories, all weak regrets, and to be her own

true loyal self. Feverishly, unweariedly she toiled at her "work," her occupations, even her amusements, trying to drown in a ceaseless life of action the still small voice of "what might have been."

And slowly and surely the succour came, came with returning health and strength, with hardly-won peace and rest; and now, on this August morning, though in the depths of her heart she realizes how impossible it would be ever really to forget the past, her brave spirit is joyous and at rest at last, for she feels that the struggle is over now, the victory won.

Cecil Ruthven was a woman who when she loved, gave *all*, as women do once and once only in their lives, lavishly, ungrudgingly, and never counting the cost; but who, did she *lose* that all, had power to do the hardest thing which life can

give to mortal man to do, *i.e.*, not to “forget,” but to “live down.”

“Forgetting” is often but another name for hurt vanity, lowered pride, and the temper which shews itself in extra emphasized “dead cuts,” only to be revenged by weeping and wailing in softer moments, when some chance meeting again brings the old sorrow face to face. But when a life’s story is “lived down,” after many months or years of honestly acknowledged and weary strife against its power, then and then alone comes rest, for there is no peace like unto that of the dead!

And so a soft bright look rests on Cecil Ruthven’s face to-day, as once more she peruses the long Indian letter which this morning’s post has brought her. It is from Alan Dering; and though here and there a stray word in the epistle tells an

unconscious tale of sadness and loneliness to the woman who can so well read every vague thought or idea of his, on the whole the news contained in it is cheery enough, and Lady Ruthven's heart feels happy in her friend's welfare.

A dreamy chain of old memories draws out its slow length before her gaze, and as the letter lies idly on her lap, her thoughts wander far away to the sunny Eastern climes, where its writer is even now obeying the behest so earnestly urged upon his remembrance long years ago: "there is the world, and there is life hidden in it somewhere,—it must not be wasted."

She sighs half sadly as the reflection crosses her mind how widely sundered are their several interests now; and vaguely she envies poor pretty Rosabel the grace which a kindly fate has accorded unto her

of sharing that loved one's life wheresoever its destiny may lead him. And Rosabel seemed to value all this so little ! A new dress or a new trinket would have power perhaps to rouse her soul unto enthusiasm, but she seemed either wilfully or unconsciously blind to the great and untold well of happiness which the love and respect of such a man as Alan Dering must assuredly have brought her had she cared to keep it.

For Lady Ruthven, in the rash and unthinking judgment which we so often mete out to others, never doubted that this man's love had once been all Rosabel's ; and in her true honest heart she grudged the latter not one whit a treasure which had been so fairly won. How often in this world it is the *second* in the race which has fought the bravest fight and striven against the heaviest odds !

Cecil put on her hat, and collected her book, sunshade, and other necessities for the enjoyment of an idle summer morning, and strolled along the smooth trim lawn, to where a clear trout-stream bordered the small domain.

Helter-skelter rushed the brown trout and silvery minnows in every direction in the water, as on its surface became reflected the vision of a white-clad young woman, sheltered by a large green sunshade; and even an old water-rat, possessing much stability of character, not to say most unblushing effrontery,—sprang off his pollard root with a splash and betook himself hastily to the opposite bank, at sight of so unusual an apparition.

Lady Ruthven sauntered slowly on through the wicket-gate at the end of the lawn, and into the great green

meadow beyond, and finally through the glaring hot cornfield which now alone lay between her and the cool shady mass of beeches that marked the boundaries of Beechwarden.

It was becoming most oppressively hot, and though "gathering poppies in the corn" has a most bewitchingly rural sound, Cecil was mindful of the fact that this process is usually accompanied by sticky fingers and a crick in the back, so she let those "scarlet ladies" flaunt on in peace, and hastened her steps until a high wooden stile led her safely into the park of Beechwarden.

Here there was no glaring sunshine, here all was cool and still, and an indescribable feeling of rest stole over Cecil Ruthven's heart. It was a joy even to *live* on such a day, she thought, as each step on the soft yielding moss, sprinkled

with fallen beechnuts, seemed to stir up fresh fragrance from earth and flowers. On and on she wandered until at last, upon reaching a sudden opening in the wood, she found herself standing by the edge of a small deep pond fringed with alders and willow-trees. Close around it towered the great beech-trees, shutting out every gleam of sunshine which sought to reflect itself on the water's dark bosom, and even the water-lilies floating in its midst seemed less pure and white than usual, as if nothing innocent or bright could flourish in so dark and weird a spot.

Involuntarily Lady Ruthven shuddered, and the thought crossed her mind, how appropriately melodramatic this dreary place would be for the commission of some deed of darkness or the haunt of some ghostly victim of crime; and as she

sat down on a fallen tree to take a few moments' rest, involuntarily she looked furtively towards the reassuring sight of a tall pile of chimneys with columns of smoke issuing therefrom, betokening the near vicinity of man, and which could plainly be distinguished through the farthest grove of beech trees.

“Evidently the owner of Beechwarden has come at last,” thought Lady Ruthven to herself, and straightway fell to wondering what this brother of Rosabel Dering’s would be like, and whether all the stories told of him and his escapades were true ; above all, whether rumour had erred in saying that when he returned home at last he had not returned alone.

But her thoughts soon flew back to the past once more, and old memories crowded over her thick and fast. Once more, the water-lilies before her seemed

like unto those which even now were floating in sumptuous and peaceful content in the marble basin of the well-remembered conservatory at Grahamstown House; again she heard the trickle of the cool water, dropping slowly on to the ferns and the leaves, again the drowsy sweetness of the orange-blossoms seemed lulling her heart and mind into dreamy oblivion, and once more she heard Alan Dering's low soft tones murmuring in her ear.

Cecil Ruthven was no dreamer on life's great battle-field, for her was there no drifting down the stream from sheer lack of courage to take out the oars. But there are times when one is tired of rowing, and weary of always looking ahead, when it is very sweet to glide into the sunshine and rest, and dream of sunny memories gone by.

Her reverie ends abruptly, for a slight figure, dressed somewhat fancifully in a pale creamy colour, much ornamented with deep crimson ribbons, has suddenly advanced to the edge of the water on the Beechwarden side, and with a start of surprise, stands looking at Lady Ruthven's recumbent figure with dark eyes full of curiosity and interest.

Cecil rises to her feet, and with an involuntary haughty grace entirely her own, advances to the new comer and says apologetically :

“I'm afraid that I am intruding, but being a near neighbour to Beechwarden, I strolled in here to get a little rest and shade just now. Can you tell me if Mr. Dumaresque has returned home?” she adds hesitatingly, wondering who her new companion can possibly be.

“Yes, he returned home two days

ago," answers the other quietly, seating herself on the fallen tree from which Lady Ruthven has just risen, and from sheer lack of energy to do anything else, or from a dread of appearing uncourteous, Cecil also reseats herself, and each woman looks furtively at the other with some admiration and a decidedly rapid growing interest.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY RUTHVEN'S CONQUEST.

“Where the storm in its wrath hath lighted,
The pine lies low in the dust;
And the corn is withered and blighted,
Where the fields are red with the rust;
Falls the black frost, nipping and killing,
Where its petals the violet rears,
And the wind, though tempered, is chilling
To the lamb despoiled by the shears.

“The strong in their strength are shaken,
The wise in their wisdom fall;
And the bloom of beauty is taken—
Strength, wisdom, beauty, and all;
They vanish, their lot fulfilling,
Their doom approaches and nears,
But the wind, though tempered, is chilling
To the lamb despoiled by the shears.”

Ashtaroth.

“You say that you live near here?”
inquired Madge Lee, for it was none
other than she who now sat sharing the

impromptu bench, created by a forest giant's downfall.

"Yes, at Riverside."

"Oh! then you are Lady Ruthven," exclaimed Madge frankly. "I'm so glad, for I quite longed to see you."

"Yes?" And Cecil marvelled more and more who this girl could be, with the beautiful flashing face and rich dress, and yet with a strange accent which scarcely bespoke pride of birth.

"We came home two days ago, and my husband had to ride over to his agent's this morning, so I came out to get a little fresh air by myself. And I am so glad, for now I have seen *you*."

The ring of bright, unconscious flattery in the speaker's voice went far to disarm Lady Ruthven's gradually growing mistrust; it was impossible to help responding to such frank overtures, made

with that honest smile and bright loving gaze, though Cecil shrewdly suspected that the person before her was none other than the half-credited, half-doubted wife of Beechwarden's new possessor.

For many minutes they talked on; of the country around them, of the trees and flowers before them, and of the many trifles which strangers use as a means of becoming *en rapport* with those to whom they converse; and on the mind of each was left one dominant impression: that on Madge Lee's being deep and sincere admiration for the noble-faced, courteous-mannered woman beside her, and that on Cecil's, an overwhelming pity for the loving, honest child's heart, so freely spread out before her.

"And so you live all alone?" mused Madge in some wonder, as she unconsciously realised how many could surely

be found only too anxious to invade this enforced solitude of the pale proud woman beside her. "Are you never lonely?"

"Not often," but a quickly repressed sigh somewhat belied the speaker's words.

"I *couldn't* live alone, and that's all about it," laughed Madge gaily. "Why it would be like living in this dark, dreary place here, with never a ray of sunshine to warm one's heart," she added gravely.

"So you value the sun beyond all else?" asked Cecil, in the vague dreamy tone so often used by those who live much alone.

"Indeed I do. That is," and the bright gipsy face softened quickly, "I value the sunshine which others can shed on my life, for it will surely bring me a good time some day too!"

Cecil glanced curiously at the bright, hopeful face, and said half sadly—

“My experience is, that it is not well to depend too much on someone else for the sunshine of one’s life; the day may come when the sun will set, and darkness reign over all!”

“That can never be for me *now*,” exclaimed Madge involuntarily, and then stopped and coloured crimson at her own apparently incomprehensible speech.

For a moment she debated in her mind whether she should tell this new-found friend who she herself was; but no, she dared not. What if the other turned from her with that cold, stony glare, before which so many Christian matrons abroad had made her oftentimes wince? Little recked she of *them*, but this, this was different,—and unshed tears rose to Madge’s eyes as she pictured to

herself a stern, contemptuous look on that pale, sweet face, which now glanced at her so kindly and lovingly.

As she turned her head again, she caught the earnest pitying gaze which Lady Ruthven's deep grey eyes involuntarily wore, and ere she could speak a word, Cecil's hand clasped hers with quiet force, as she said—

“I am a good many years older than you, so perhaps there is less sunshine for me in life than I hope and pray there may be for you ; but if ever your sun is behind the clouds, and those clouds look thick and dark for want of a friend's hand to tear them aside and let the light shine through, will you come to me and let me try to help you then ? And now, good-bye.”

Something rises in the gipsy girl's throat and chokes her utterance, and

something else rises to her dark eyes and obscures her vision ; but though she answers never a word, and only waves her hand in farewell to the tall, slight figure in white, which is once more returning from whence it came, long does she stand there watching the eddies and ripples on the dark, dank waters before her, as her mind travels over and over again through each moment and incident of the bygone hour.

That night at dinner, after the servants have left the room, Madge comes out with her great piece of news :

“ Geoff, I saw Lady Ruthven to-day.”

“ Did you, little woman ? And is she as pretty as they say ? ”

“ I thought *not* at first ; but directly she spoke to me, she seemed lovely—I never saw a face so fascinating.”

“ *Spoke* to you ? ” echoed Geoffry Du-

maresque in surprise ; then recollecting himself, he added, “ but where on earth could you have met Lady Ruthven ? ”

“ Oh, I went out for a walk this morning after you had started for Mr. Drainer's, and I rather lost my way, I think, for I got thicker and thicker into the trees, and at last reached the most gruesome, desolate-looking pond I ever saw in my life,—oh, a horrible place ! ”

“ I know ; it's called the Round Pond, and is supposed to have already been the watery grave of two or three suicides,” laughed young Mr. Dumaresque.

“ Just what it looks like,” exclaimed Madge, shuddering ; “ but, to go on with my story, what should I see sitting on a fallen tree close to the water's edge, but a lady dressed in white, with a big, green parasol.”

“ I suppose you thought it was the

ghost of one of the Round Pond's victims?"

"No, I didn't; my nerves are too good for that; but I *was* surprised when she came over and spoke to me, so kindly and nicely too!" Poor Madge, the latter experience had seldom been hers at the hands of her own sex.

"And what did you talk about?" asked Geoffry, curiously, wondering in his heart how much, or rather how little Lady Ruthven could have known of her interlocutor.

So Madge recounted all, and as she finished her recital, and with broken voice told how Cecil had taken her hand and spoken words of kindness and promised help, should such ever be required,—Geoffry Dumaresque realised that Lady Ruthven must surely have divined to whom she was speaking; and as he noted

the gleam of womanly satisfaction which flooded poor Madge's dark face at the recollection of those same kind words so gently spoken, a fervent blessing went forth from his very heart and soul in the lowly muttered words "God bless her; she must be a good woman, I think!"

CHAPTER XII.

SUNSHINE BEFORE STORM.

“I desire your good,
But, plot as I may, I can find no way
How a blow should fall, such as falls on men,
Nor prove too much for your womanhood.”

The Worst of It.

THE hot August sun blazed down with undiminished vigour next day on the heads of Mr. Dumaresque and his young wife, when an hour after lunch found them starting for a long drive, with the intention of inspecting the county town, and other objects of interest to local residents.

Madge was charioteer, and her early training in the *haute école* stood her in some stead, for she found little diffi-

culty now in driving the thoroughly-broken stepper which had been bought for her especial use. Moreover, she *looked* well driving, plainly dressed in neat grey homespun from head to foot; and as the showy, well-bred chestnut horse she drove, bent beneath her light hand on the reins and stepped with additional vigour, as if proud of his new owner, Geoffry Dumaresque was fain to acknowledge to himself, with almost a sigh, "no fairer woman ere was seen" than this, his wife.

"Geoff, how grave you look!" exclaimed Madge's joyous voice. "You're enough to give one bad spirits for ever and a day. Very different to my little 'Will o' the Wisp' here," added she, patting with her whip the restless little chestnut who was shying and dancing at every real and imaginary object which he

met *en route*, "for he's quite determined to have a 'good time' to-day and so am I."

"So I see," answered Geoffry, smiling back at the brightly beautiful face turned to him. "But take care, Madge; he's rather a treacherous brute is this little chestnut, and though all he does is from fun, it is decidedly 'horse play' sometimes. He gave me plenty to do yesterday morning when I drove him to the station, and had I known of his light-hearted disposition before, I should not have bought him for you, I can tell you."

"Oh nonsense, Geoff, he's a charming little beast, and I won't let you speak evil of him. It'll soon take his spirits down, dragging me about these nasty heavy roads, I'm sure!"

"Well, as long as he doesn't tire you,

or make you nervous, I don't care," said the young husband with solicitude.

"Nervous," laughed Madge, gaily ; "I never was that in my life except once, when the big drum behind him frightened a new piebald leader just in the narrow streets of a town, and he backed bodily into a jam and tart shop. And then I only trembled for the windows and the tarts, because I feared having to pay the damage out of my salary."

Geoffrey looked as gloomy as any allusion to her past life of toil, which the girl so honestly and innocently prided herself upon, usually made him ; and with quick intuition his companion changed the subject at once.

"Geoff, did you say that some one was coming to see you to-morrow ? "

"Yes, our family lawyer is coming over

from Heversham to see me to-morrow morning ;” and again young Mr. Dumasque sighed involuntarily as he remembered for *whom* the provision was to be made, the arrangement of which necessitated the man of law’s presence.

“How vexing ! I wanted you to take me to the keeper’s cottage on the other side of the big wood to-morrow morning, to see all the young pheasants you told me about.”

“Never mind, dear. We’ll go there later in the day, after Parchment has gone ; it will be cooler then for walking too. You don’t seem to take a bit of care of yourself, Madge,” he said with anxious reproach.

“Every bit as much as I’m worth,” laughed the girl, righting “Will o’ the Wisp” with a judicious touch of the whip, as he showed symptoms of wheel-

ing bodily round at the sight of an unoffending ass led by an old woman in a poke bonnet.

“As much as she was worth to *him*? Ah, how could words or thoughts ever define *that*,” thinks the man beside her, with all the fervid devotion of his weak, loving heart.

They drove through the streets of Heversham, and though she remembered it not, Madge looked once again on the very spot where her childish heart had throbbed with the pride and pleasure of a first success so many a year ago, and where, all unknowing, the very man who now sat by her side, had lost his youthful heart to the little fairy rider on her snow-white pony, never to find it again in this world.

“The very names of the streets seem familiar to me, Geoff, though I can’t

think why. And that old stone cross in the market-place has appeared to me in my dreams I'm certain, for its face looks like that of an old friend;" and Madge leant eagerly forward to scan the said antiquarian remain with deep interest.

"Nonsense, Madge. You're always fancying that sort of thing now," answered Geoffry, in the indulgent tone one uses to an invalid or a child. In truth, this idea of hers only struck him as a fanciful whim.

"No, it's no 'make-believe' of my own," said Madge, shaking her head gravely; but just then, a series of renewed frivolities on the part of the little chestnut turned her attention to other matters.

After a long drive, which had embraced every place or thing worth seeing for

many a mile round, Mr. Dumaresque and his wife were nearing the turn off the high road to Beechwarden, when, in passing by the white wicket-gate belonging to the little cottage called Riverside, they saw a lady standing with her arms leant idly on it, apparently wrapt in serious meditation.

“That’s *her*!” whispered Madge, in ungrammatical eagerness; and at sound of the quick-trotting hoofs and rolling carriage wheels, Lady Ruthven started and looked round.

“What a glorious face!” thought Geoffrey to himself; “and yet it’s not a happy one,” he added, after another fleeting glance.

And when Cecil,—instantly recognising in the bright dark face looking so earnestly and anxiously towards her, the stranger of the Round Pond,—waved back

a brief and kindly recognition, Geoffry Dumaesque lifted his hat with almost reverent courtesy to the woman who, by that one small act of kindness to the girl he loved so well, had raised her whole sex in his eyes more than he himself could perhaps have realised.

Cecil, too, felt all the happier, as she walked slowly back to the cottage, and sat down once more before her easel, upon which stood a picture that she fondly hoped might even some day be admitted within the sacred walls of B——n House itself. For it was a striking picture enough, though as yet rough and unfinished; but the power of the conception stood out boldly and clearly, and to an artist's eye condoned much that was left undone.

The scene pictured was the celebration of vespers in some monastery chapel, and

it seemed as if its key-note were the same as that of Gustave Doré's well-known "Neophyte," though there the resemblance between the two pictures ceased. Here was a dim, shadowy aisle with vaulted roof, and a long row of dark and motionless kneeling figures, with hands clasped and faces hidden, all save one. That one face is raised, and is looking up eagerly at the flood of light which pours down on it from the high, narrow window above, with a wild longing in the miserable, passionate, dark eyes for light somewhere—only light!

He is but a boy, and earth looks very bright and sweet to him still. Is this living tomb really necessary for salvation? and can *only* the death of his heart gain the life of his soul? The answer seems to stand out in letters of fire on every side, in the motto and

formula of his order: "Brother, we must die!"

And written on a scrap of paper, pinned to the canvas, were a few words in Lady Ruthven's handwriting, words which had evidently given the first vague idea of the young monk's despairing soul-agony—"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STORM BREAKS.

“Tôt ou tard tout se sait.”

MDME. DE GENLIS.

“Der Mensch erfährt, er sei auch wer er mag,
Ein letztes Glück, und einen letzten Tag.”

GÖETHE.

“I WISH that good, prosy old man would take his departure,” thought Madge to herself next morning as luncheon time drew near and there were still no signs of the long interview between her husband and his lawyer, Mr. Parchment, drawing to a close. It had been held too with closed doors and much solemnity, and Madge was beginning to feel “out in the

cold " morally and physically, and to long for some one or something to talk to. So she sat on the window-sill of the hall and waited impatiently for the first sound of an opening door or a dearly-loved footstep and voice ; and as the moments flew by, and none of these came to her rescue, she began to consider her sad case only a few degrees less dark than hers of the " Moated Grange," who at least had the advantage of being apparently able to express her woes in perfect metre and rhyming verse.

When luncheon was announced shortly after, Madge rose languidly to obey the summons for mere form's sake, but the instant she was left alone the old listlessness crept over her, and an impatient " I do *wish* he would come," showed that one advent alone could brighten her heart and face. Weary of waiting, after a time she

strolled into the billiard-room, which led out from the room where she was, and finding a sofa behind the entrance door to look most inviting and comfortable, sat down on it to rest and wait, listening intently for any sounds of approaching footsteps.

But, sad to say, this modern "Mariana" did not possess the exhaustless fount of patience and of tears which so distinguished her time-honoured example, and so, after a time she fell asleep, and dreamed of old days when she was still a little child in a tattered frock, wandering along hot, dusty highways, and leaning her weary little head against a cool, great stone archway to rest, whilst the murmur of many voices seemed rustling in the surrounding trees.

With a start she wakes. Surely that is a real voice now, and no dream? Yes, it

is her husband's, speaking in the room next to the one she is sitting in, and for an instant she stays quiet to hear whose may be the answering voice.

It is said that on the eve of some great crisis or misfortune, the future sufferers oftentimes feel a strange foreboding of the danger to come, and are conscious of a sad prophetic warning of their coming doom. But no warning was there now for Madge Lee ; and the stride from sunlight into darkest shade was but a man's step.

A clatter of plates, an hospitable " Try some of this brown sherry, Parchment ; " and hearing this Madge rises to her feet with a smile on her laughing mouth, and smooths her ruffled brown hair preparatory to making her appearance.

Again Geoffry Dumaesque's voice is heard. " I need not tell you, Parchment,

how anxious I am that Mrs. Dumaresque should know nothing of all we have spoken of, until the child is born; the shock might kill her almost."

"I see no reason why she should know it, Mr. Dumaresque," and the answering voice falls sadly and gravely on the listener's ear. "Until the child is born there can be no legal necessity for declaring matters. But have you thought of another thing? Why not go to Mrs. Dumaresque, and tell her all which you have told me, and have the marriage ceremony quietly performed in London, whilst there is yet time?"

"How *could* I tell her?" and Geoffrey Dumaresque's fair young face looks the picture of despairing irresolution.

"You *ought* to tell her," answers his good angel's kind grave voice. "I'm an old man, Mr. Dumaresque, and I've

daughters of my own, just the age of that poor lassie yonder, and I judge for her as if she were one of them."

"I wish to God I had told her long ago!" bursts out the lad in his bitter repentance. "But I feared at first that she would leave me, if she knew all, and that I should never see her again; and afterwards, lately, I was afraid for her own sake to tell her."

"Take the advice of an old man, Mr. Dumaresque, and do it *now*, though so late. Even let the shock prostrate her at first, she will try to rally for her child's sake and be strong to save it. Trust to her love for you and for it, and speak whilst there is yet time?"

"I *cannot*," groans Geoffry Dumaresque, with a shrinking look of fear in his blue eyes. "How can I tell her, so proud as she is, that all this while she has been

no wife ? I tell you, that ever since the day when she so unselfishly offered to sacrifice name and fame for sake of my interests alone, and I realised the wrong I had done her, which could never again be righted, I have not known one moment's peace ! ”

“ It's a bad business, but don't make it worse, Mr. Dumaresque, if you'll pardon my plain speaking. Go to her, tell her that the marriage ceremony was invalid and must at once be gone through again, and trust to her true noble heart to forgive you all. A woman who could voluntarily suffer as she must have done, for your sake, will be equally strong in bearing involuntary suffering, or I mistake me much ! ”

A strange low inarticulate sound breaks forth from behind the half-closed door beyond, but so low that neither man

hears it. It is like the cry of one suffering from the effects of some horrible dream, struggling vainly to find voice to speak, but the words will not come.

"I know you are right, Parchment, and I'll take your advice, I think," says Geoffry Dumaresque at last, in a tone of steady decision.

"You won't regret it, Mr. Dumaresque," answers the lawyer kindly. "And of course I shall be prepared to act instantaneously in the way of making every necessary preparation when you once tell me to begin doing so," he adds rising.

"Are you off? I'll drive with you to Heversham I think, and sign those things you want at once. Mrs. Dumaresque is out—at least she is nowhere in the house that I can find, and to tell you the truth, I'd sooner not meet her until I tell her all."

“But you *will* tell her?” Geoffrey’s evident desire for procrastination makes the lawyer a shade suspicious of his probable strength of mind.

“I swear I will, Parchment. She is all the world to me and if I lose her now, God help me! But I will be true and honourable at last, and trust to her to forgive me.”

Again that low inarticulate cry, full of a soul’s wild speechless agony! Ah, why cannot it penetrate to Geoffrey Dumas-resque’s ears, that he may turn and see the agonised entreaty of the outstretched arms and pleading face? But Madge Lee has neither power to move or cry out, the shock has seemingly stilled the very life in her body, only the heart is living on in its dire agony.

There comes to her the sound of a closing door, and of receding voices, a

cry of "Madge ! Madge ! where are you ?" re-echoes through the house, and she dumbly answers it by a weak, piteous effort to rise, but all in vain. She hears the sound of a carriage on the gravel drive before the hall door, the clattering of hoofs and scattering of gravel, as "Will o' the Wisp" is evidently indulging in his old tricks once more, the fast receding sound of carriage-wheels disappearing into the far distance, and then with a low moan of impotent anguish she falls prostrate on the floor, mercifully insensible to all things bad or good.

A great quiet reigned over the old house of Beechwarden,—the lull before the storm. Outside, flowers bloomed, birds sang, the sun shone, and the drowsy sweet-scented summer air pervaded heart and soul with serene content ; inside, there seemed a deathly stillness, befitting the last weary struggle of a dying heart.

But the peace was soon broken. A message came in hot haste, telling of a terrible accident to Beechwarden's young master,—a confused account of a frightened horse, an overturned carriage, and a young man lying on the road with white still face and blue eyes closed for ever, and that was all.

All? But who was to tell *her?* the servants whispered to each other, fearfully; and even as they spoke, a girl with white wan face and despairing eyes, passed by them like a shadow.

“Can she know?” was the silent wonder of all, but none spoke.

“What is it?” says Madge, turning round at last to face the crowd of frightened faces. More than one there present notices the strange want of interest and absence of fear which is apparent in her tone.

“Ma’am, there has been an accident,” stammers the old housekeeper hurriedly, “Mr. Dumaresque has been thrown out of the carriage;” the woman stops and her voice dies away in a sob.

“Will *none* of you tell me what it all means?” says Madge, in the same odd, constrained tone as before.

“Well, ma’am, you see, it was just as we got near the railway station,” begins a groom, whose livery is torn and covered with dust, and whose face looks shocked and terrified beyond words; “and that little chestnut ’orse, ’e took fright at the London express which came by just then, and bolted down a side-road, and ran into a coal cart standing there. And the dog-cart tilted over, so that master fell out right on ’is ’ead, you see, ma’am.”

For a moment there is no answer. The wondering servants cannot com-

prehend this strange unnatural stillness, and look at each other in fear. How can they know that the heart which they essay to fathom is already broken? There is a limit to human suffering beyond which even fresh pain can leave no mark.

“Is he dead?” the dreaded question comes at last.

“Yes, yes, my dearie,” murmurs the old housekeeper, taking Madge by the arm and leading her away like a child; but she need have feared no resistance from the passive swaying form of the miserable girl, for once more a merciful oblivion stole over her senses and lulled the terrible aching agony in her heart, and she lay hour after hour, in a state of semi-unconsciousness, knowing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling nothing,—blind even to all pain and sorrow.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ROUND POND.

“Gone! wholly gone! How cold and dark,
A cheerless world of hope bereft,
The beacon quenched, and not a spark,
In all the dull grey ashes left.

“Ay, if the cup be crushed and spilt,
More than the sin, the loss I rue;
And if the cloud was black with guilt
The silver light of love shone through.

“And though the price be maddening pain,
One half their raptures to restore,
And live but half those hours again,
I’d pay the cruel price once more.

“Dreams! dreams! Not backward flows the tide
Of life and love. It cannot be.
Well! thine the triumph and the pride,
The suffering and the shame for me.”

Void.

It was past midnight when at last Madge awoke from her almost unconscious sleep, and she sat up in bed and stared

blankly around her. The sound of some sleeper breathing near attracted her attention, and her eyes fell on an impromptu couch arranged at the foot of her bed, whereon lay quietly sleeping the young housemaid who as yet had been Madge's own attendant since her arrival at Beechwarden. The girl had feared to leave her mistress all alone, and so had evidently taken off her dress and lain down on the sofa to snatch what rest she could, relying on being easily aroused by the first sound or sign of movement on the part of the latter.

But, weary with the excitement of the past day, and rendered heavy and drowsy by the many tears which her kind heart had caused her to shed, she heard nothing, saw nothing, when a small, trembling figure crept stealthily out of bed, and began to dress in hot haste.

There was no one to mark the feverish agony in the wild dark eyes, the unnatural strength of the hands, as they tore rather than lifted each garment as it was wanted in turn ; no ear heard the incessant mutter, " I must go, I must go. We shall have no right here, neither my child nor I. Oh, the shame ! the shame !" in despairing heartbroken accents over and over again.

With the quick, cunning instinct of her gipsy blood, Madge throws aside her richer garments and dons the plain cotton dress of the sleeping girl beside her. Then with a large grey shawl wrapped close around her, she glides noiselessly out of the door, down the stairs, and past the very room where *he* now lies, stiff and stark ; but in her feverish madness she remembers this not, neither heeds, and the sad moaning creak of the big hall

door, as it revolves slowly on its hinges, is the only sound of farewell which accompanies Madge Lee out into the darkness of the night.

For a few hours after sunrise all was wonder and confusion in the household at Beechwarden; then their mistress's disappearance was more or less explained to them as the secret of her true position there became unavoidably disclosed. Even Mr. Parchment, though his kind heart sorrowed much for the desolate girl, and he took every pains, for sheer charity's sake, to ascertain where she was to be found, felt powerless to do much in the matter; for the deed prepared the very day on which Geoffry Dumaresque came to an untimely end, had never been signed, and so no provision had been made for the future of either mother or child, and the next heir to Beechwarden,

Alan Dering, was far away in India, and out of reach of all consultation.

So, though there were many to wonder, there were few to care what became of poor ill-fated Madge, and even Lady Ruthven's anxious zeal on her behalf met with but little help or encouragement.

What mattered it to the world at large that not twenty miles distant, on a pallet bed in the workhouse of a large manufacturing town, lay a mother and her newly-born child? or that the pale wan face, tossing to and fro in restless delirium, was the face of Geoffry Dumasresque's idolised love? It was but one more miserable woman, one more act in the tragedies of this world; what need to lament over so very common a case—would not the hours bring many more such?

And so she struggled back to life once more, though scarce to reason ; and when the time came, that, with a small pittance in her hand, Madge Lee was bidden to depart and go on her way, with her baby at her breast,—a strange and unconquerable desire took possession of her to have one last look at the scene of her past happiness.

At first the hot sun and the glaring chalky highway seemed to dazzle and perplex her ; and, though fairly strong now, her limbs seemed to have lost all their old freedom and elasticity, and she dragged herself wearily along like one who carries a burthen almost too heavy to bear.

And yet the burden was light enough. A little pinched, fretful, baby face peered out from under the grey shawl now ; a low, melancholy, crooning cry made itself heard incessantly.

“Hush, hush!” murmured the girl fondly, patting the ugly little head with gentle hand; but the wail ceased not, and neither did the sun allay its scorching heat, and yet Madge Lee tramped on resolutely and untiringly.

“What a pretty girl!” remarked a gentleman to his wife, as they drove past her on the road.

“Yes; but how ill she seems, and her eyes look so wild, too,” answered his companion pitifully.

But Madge neither saw the kind look nor heard the kind words; her brain was dulled and deadened now, and the only sound which seemed to penetrate it was the fretful and ceaseless wail of the child.

Three times she stopped and sat down by the wayside to rest, and as often staggered once more to her feet and held on her way determinedly. The hard train-

ing of her youth stood her in good stead now, and the tireless endurance of her race kept her energies unflagged, her strength unexhausted. Towards evening she neared Beechwarden at last, and looked towards its distant line of trees with the agonised gaze of some hunted animal which sees in the far distance a sanctuary.

Lady Ruthven, playing softly to herself in the summer twilight, little knows or guesses *who* is now leaning against the little white wicket-gate, so near by, and listening to the music with dreamy, uncomprehending ears.

“ She was good to me, she said she’d help me ; ” murmured the white wan lips yearningly, and for an instant the girl hesitated whether to enter.

But the remembrance of the past drove her back, for her proud, gipsy blood felt

maddened beneath the taint of shame, though in the days when she had felt sure of her own innocence, this taint had seemed scarce worth a thought if suffered for *his* sake. What the world's harsh condemnation, or her fellow-mortals' cruel words and deeds had failed to do, the knowledge of her unconscious shame, so innocently born, had achieved at last; for the proud, desolate young heart was almost broken now, the light in the fearless eyes was quenched for ever; the gay, laughter-loving mouth would never smile again.

Across the meadow and over the stile, she wanders on, each step growing more faltering and weaker than the last, whilst the baby's voice wails on and on in a feeble moan of pain.

She forces her way through briars and thorns, unheeding and unknowing; she

lays the child down on the grass at last, and sitting a little way apart, puts her fingers in her ears, to try and still that terrible ceaseless cry which seems eating into her very brain.

No food all day, and the girl's weak frame seems almost spent now; but her eyes shine like coals of fire in the dim starlight, and she rocks herself to and fro in restless, wakeful misery; and still the dying baby's pitiful cry wails on and on ceaselessly.

Two hours she sat there, hugging the child to her bosom, and staring before her with glazed, unseeing eyes, and its little cries grew fainter and fainter at last, its waxen face grew whiter, its little hands almost ceased to struggle.

When the moon rose in all its quiet glory, and its silvery light penetrated even through the thick branches sur-

rounding the lonely Round Pond at Beechwarden, its rays shone down on a sad and pitiful sight.

On the bank, by the water's edge, knelt a despairing woman, from whose white lips burst forth a heart-rending cry: "Oh my baby, my little baby! It was all I had left me now!" and on the moonlit water, floating peacefully amongst the sweet white water-lilies in their unsullied purity, was the body of a little child, whose waxen face upturned to heaven looked even as pure and innocent as they.

When morning broke, with the instinct of a brain almost verging on insanity, Madge Lee fled from the desolate spot, and going to a farmhouse, begged for food. All day she wandered about in lonely fields and copses, but the wail of a dying child still sounded in her ears.

Vainly she strove to drive away the sound ; despairingly she threw herself on the ground and clasped her clenched hands to her head, in a vain effort to shut out all sense of hearing ; the weary little voice wailed on, ever on, now louder, now fainter, but never ceasing.

Night saw her once more tottering towards the spot where she had left her child's body, its fancied cries seemed to urge her footsteps back to the place where lay the last thing left her on earth to love, and like a hunted animal that when night falls flies back to its murdered offspring unseen by man, the gipsy girl bent her steps again to the fatal place where lay buried the last and only hope which this world had given her.

Swaying, staggering, gesticulating like one demented, she walked faster and faster, breaking into a feeble run as she

neared the fatal Round Pond at last, and still in her ears rang the cry of her child, wailing on ceaselessly.

“My God! if it should be gone!” bursts forth a hoarse cry, and the wild savage blood of her race rises in her veins at thought of being robbed of even that one last look her mad heart was now so set on, and the sweet, laughing face wears an expression strangely akin to that of a tigress robbed of its whelps.

But no. Amongst the water-lilies there lies one poor little broken flower, the love of which will never gladden human heart again.

Lady Ruthven, as she strolls out in the calm September night, so refreshingly cool after the burden and heat of the day, turns her steps by chance towards Beechwarden, and approaches the stile into the wood. Leaning on it, she

pauses, for a strange wish has come over her mind to see the weird and desolate Round Pond by moonlight, divided by a very distinct womanly fear of so dark and ghostly an expedition.

At last, with a laugh at her own childish folly, she crosses the stile and enters the wood, making her way to the well-known spot. It is scarcely more than nine o'clock yet—too early for possible poachers or other nocturnal marauders to be about, she assures herself.

But as she nears the Round Pond, a stranger and more startling sight than poachers or midnight marauders greets her eyes; for on the edge of the sedgy, reed-covered bank, stands the tall and helmeted form of a myrmidon of the law, and opposite to him is kneeling a girl, whose face wears an expression only

of utter and apathetic despair, whilst between them both, lying wet, cold, and still, in the moonlight, is the body of a little child, with a spray of water-lilies entangled in its arms.

CHAPTER XV.

JUDGE NOT.

“ There’s a bonny wild-rose on the mountain side,
Mary Hamilton.
In the glare of noon she hath drooped and died,
Mary Hamilton.
* * * * *
There’s a lamb lies lost at the head of the glen,
Mary Hamilton.
Lost and missed from sheiling and pen,
Mary Hamilton.
* * * * *
The mist is gathering ghostly and chill,
Mary Hamilton.
And the weary maid cometh down from the hill,
Mary Hamilton.
* * * * *
Too late for the rose, the evening rain,
Mary Hamilton.
Too late for the lamb, the shepherd’s pain,
Mary Hamilton.
Too late at the door the maiden’s stroke,
Too late the plea when the doom hath been spoke,
Too late the balm when the heart is broke,
Mary Hamilton.”

THE county town is full to overcrowding,

for it is the week of the Assizes, and more than one important trial is expected to take place. A pale, anxious face looks out of an hotel window in a quiet street, gazing listlessly at the passers-by as they hurry to and fro.

Lady Ruthven, for it is she, has left no stone unturned on behalf of the unhappy girl who this day is to stand forth and take her trial at the hands of her countrymen, for the murder of her own child.

Ever since the night she was arrested has Madge Lee preserved the same unbroken stupefaction of heart and soul, always silent as the dead, never weeping or moaning. Vainly has the prison chaplain exhorted her to confess, if need there be for confession ; vainly does her counsel urge her to at least state *something* upon which he may build his defence ;

vainly does Cecil Ruthven weep and plead to her, to listen and to speak, were it but one word.

The girl hears all with ears that hear not, sees everything with eyes that see not, and is as one bereft of speech or feeling; a dumb animal simply, but in dire pain.

Lady Ruthven has exerted herself to the utmost to secure a good counsel for the unhappy girl who seems so utterly deserted and friendless, save for her own true self; and hour after hour, whenever allowed, does Cecil sit with her, striving in all loving-kindness to arouse some sense of feeling in that poor, numbed, and frozen heart.

The trial of Madge Lee is expected to come on this very morning, and though unwilling to be present in court, Lady Ruthven has determined to remain some-

where within its precincts, to be near the unfortunate girl should occasion require it, and is even now waiting for a promised escort to take her there.

It is three o'clock in the afternoon, and the trial is almost over. There have been so few witnesses to examine in the case that it has only taken one-half of the usual time, and when the very last of these has left the witness-box, all attention is riveted on the opposing counsel.

From first to last the prisoner has sat unmoved, with the same weary, hopeless look on her small childish face, which no longer sparkles in bright, laughing mirth, but is pale and sad, and deathly quiet.

A murmur of unwilling admiration had greeted her first appearance in court, but she heeded it not; nor did the pitying words of many a kind-hearted man and woman in the crowd reach the ears which

were deafened to almost every earthly sound. Silent and pale she remained there like one in a dream ; only an occasional quick glance round the court from her wild dark eyes, like some hunted animal looking eagerly for an outlet by which to escape, gave notice that hers was still a living, breathing human life.

No shadow of a change crossed her face when the learned Q.C., who conducted the prosecution, made his able and eloquent speech, which seemed to shut out all hope of her innocence. Link by link he forged the awful chain of evidence which would see her doomed ; word for word he recapitulated the narrations which swore her young life away.

As his solemn, powerful words resounded to the farthest limits of the court, perhaps the only unmoved person there was the beautiful, wan-faced girl,

almost child, who confronted him so quietly,—the prisoner at the bar.

The case for the prosecution is now closed, and the prisoner's counsel rises for the defence. He is a young beginner only, and this is almost his first great case, though rumour speaks more than highly of his previous efforts. His heart is in his work now, partly from ambition to distinguish himself, and partly from a great pity for his beautiful, friendless client, whose innocence he cannot doubt.

For nearly half an hour he has spoken, his young, earnest face lit up with zeal and pity; and every word which falls from his lips is listened to eagerly and attentively. He draws a vivid picture of Madge's first days of happiness, of the love borne her by her boy husband, and by all those beneath her, of her own sweet, bright self. Anon he passes to the

terrible day of Geoffry Dumaresque's death, when the prisoner's mind had so surely become unhinged; and he recounts her sudden midnight flight and long disappearance from the few good friends who sought her sorrowing.

Then his voice sinks low, and quivers from strong excitement, as in touching accents he draws another picture of a poor distraught girl wandering to and fro, with her wailing and dying baby clasped to her breast. Carefully he makes the most of even the smallest bit of evidence which can tell on his hearers; and many a sob is heard in court as he describes the bitter despair of the lonely young soul, struggling hard in its death agony.

For the first time now, a change has come over the prisoner's face, such a change as has never been seen there since the day of Geoffry Dumaresque's death.

The wild, wandering look has left her large, dark eyes, the colour deepens on her face, a soft, loving smile plays round her mouth, and once more she looks a child again, the sweet Madge Lee of long ago.

Not a glance does she give to the crowded court, its sea of faces is hid from her sight; but as one in a dream she listens to her counsel's stirring words, her eyes never leaving his face for one instant even, drinking in each syllable as one who hears a tale of strange, vital interest.

At last, when he reaches that part of his sad story, where the heart-broken young mother had wandered into the cold, dark wood, still carrying the wailing burthen whose cries were driving her to the very verge of insanity, and appeals to all there present to picture to them-

selves a mother's agony over her child's death struggle in the dark and silent night, a cry rang forth, an exceeding bitter cry; and the prisoner's head is buried in her hands as she moans out in heart-broken accents, "Oh, my baby! —my little baby! It was all I had left!"

There was a sound of suppressed sobs throughout the court, and even the grave stern face of the judge looked pityingly down on Madge's bent head, as she continued to weep convulsively.

Her clever young counsel saw the chance given him, and seized it at once.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said, in his clear earnest voice, "this is no acting on the part of the prisoner, no well-timed display of emotional thought and feeling; it is the cry which comes straight from a mother's heart! Cast your eyes for one

instant on that slight, shrinking girl, almost child, before you ; does *she* look like a cruel, implacable murderess ? Think of the days and nights of ineffable torture which she had endured, of her weary wanderings to and fro on the face of the earth, homeless, houseless, friendless, an outcast from society, and can you wonder that her brain should have reeled at last ? Think too of how her miserable soul must have writhed in sorest anguish to witness the pain and suffering of her little innocent child ; think of the agony with which each small feeble cry must have re-echoed in the mother's soul, and condemn her not ! Ye who are fathers, husbands, can ye not feel for this young child in her deep despair and agony, can ye not believe that if crime there *was* committed, it was committed when all reasoning power had fled ? And *was* the

crime truly committed? Can any one say of that weeping child yonder :—there stands that most terrible, most unnatural of earth's abortions, a mother without a mother's love and mercy, a dread infanticide? The medical evidence laid before you shows that the infant's life must have almost, if not quite, ebbed out, ere ever its body was placed in the water; how dare we to judge of minutes or seconds, where a human life is at stake? No living eye looked on at those last sad hours of this poor infant's life, save that of a woman from whose distraught mind all reason had fled; who can say at what exact moment its little life was required of it? Gentlemen of the jury, I have no more to say. For the sake of justice and right, for the sake of mercy, an ye have hearts in you, I entreat for mercy to be shown to this

child. But so convinced am I of her innocence, so sure am I that all the world will re-echo the fiat of 'not guilty,' which I pray to God I may hear this morning given forth, that I leave her case in your hands, gentlemen of the jury, with all solemn trust and confidence in your mercy, and may God defend the right ! ”

A great stillness reigns over the court. The jury have not left their places, but sit whispering together earnestly, and before many minutes have elapsed, the foreman of their number intimates that they have agreed upon their verdict.

Then is heard the sonorous voice of the Clerk of Arraignment, as he puts the momentous question : “ Gentlemen of the jury, do you find the prisoner guilty of murder, or not ? ”

And midst a breathless silence, the

foreman's answer rings out solemnly and clear : " Not guilty, my lord."

An almost sob of relief breaks forth from the listening crowd, but is instantly hushed as the judge's clear calm voice is heard speaking his short confirmation of the jury's verdict, and adding a kind word of advice and encouragement to the pale and silent prisoner at the bar.

Perhaps of all the persons there assembled, the one who looks least interested in all going on around her is Madge Lee herself. As soon as she had succeeded in controlling the bitter fit of weeping which the past reminiscences, called up by her counsel's stirring words, had brought forth, her attitude and manner were as calm as before. Everything seemed but as a vision seen in the fire, or dreamt of between the lights, to her dazed, half-blinded senses ; and even

the words, 'not guilty,' which to others were fraught with such deep and thankful significance, to her sounded only as a fragment of some waking dream.

Her dark eyes fixed themselves on those of the judge with almost painful intentness, as he spoke his few solemn words full of kindness and warning, but the blank expression of her beautiful face told plainly enough that the shock of the past terrible weeks had never as yet passed away, and though striving eagerly to see light, her whole soul was still in darkness, weighed down almost beyond recall by the shadows of the past.

Only once, at the very last, did a more human look cross Madge Lee's face, brought there by a simple act of kindness.

The attendant gaolers motioned to her kindly to leave the court, that she was

free ; but Madge looked from one strange face to the other crowding round her, and shrank back involuntarily towards her old captors.

Her young counsel came forward hastily and exclaimed, "Has she no one to take care of her, *no* friend in all this wide world?"

"Yes, she is *my* friend," answers a clear, low woman's voice, as a tall figure in black advances to Madge's side and puts one arm protectingly round her.

The girl looks into the new-comer's face with an intently anxious gaze, as if trying to recall some lost memory of long ago ; and then a new light, the dawn of recognition, beams in the wild dark eyes, as with a low sobbing cry of, "Lady Ruthven ! oh, I'm so glad you've come at last !" she throws her arms round Cecil's neck like a worn out and tired child which has gained a haven of rest at last.

CHAPTER XVI.

THREE VISIONS.

“Where the houseless shall seek a shelter, the lonely shall
find a friend,
Where the heart’s desire shall be granted, that hath trusted
and loved to the end ;
Where there’s fruit in the gardens of heaven, from hopes
that on earth were betrayed,
Where there’s rest for the soul life-wearied, that hath
striven, and suffered, and prayed.”

Soul Music.

THE scene changes to eventide in a far-off Eastern clime, and the soft light of the gloaming is battling silently but surely with the last rays of the fervid Indian sun which are still lingering over a wide sandy plain, where the only shelter for many a mile is a little grove of plantain and of palm trees, under the shade of

which is now grouped a small party of men and horses.

They are evidently returning from a hunting expedition farther up country, and to judge by the bronzed faces of the few Europeans who are amongst their number, and the jaded look of the wiry little horses which are stamping their hoofs impatiently at the end of their picket ropes, the toil has perhaps on the whole proved almost equal to the pleasure. Still, one man there, at least, looks little exhilarated at the prospect of approaching civilisation, for on Alan Dering's face rests a weary, saddened look, not alone the result of a long day's march over a hot and dusty plain, under the rays of an Indian sun.

For many a year now has that self-same look rested on his dark handsome face ; so long, that few can say when first

it came there. And yet, to-night, it is surely blended with another of strong, but sternly suppressed anxiety and suspense, the look of a man who awaits some messenger that brings almost life or death in his words, to whom he were fain to cry aloud in his fear, as did the Israelitish king of old, "Is it peace?"

Fast fell the shades of evening, and already the bright moonlight threw out in bold relief the delicate tracery of each palm-leaf and flower, as it became reflected darkly upon the glittering sand; and one by one, each man there, native or European, had sunk into a wearied slumber, dreaming of many a pathless tangle of forest and jungle, where the wild beasts of earth take their stand in a world-long struggle against mankind. One man alone was waking there, waking

and watching ceaselessly; and yet even those many sleepers lying all around him dreamed not such visionary dreams as were flitted through *his* thoughts now!

He dreamed, in his waking dream, of England and of home; of an old mediæval mansion, amidst a mass of glorious beech trees shining all russet and golden in an autumn sunlight—Beechwarden—now in truth his home. And visions rose thick and fast before his mind of life in England, the life of mingled work and sport which all men love; of the swirl and swish of the line on a rippling trout stream in the “merry month of May;” of the purple, heather-covered hills in August, and the whirr of each pack of grouse as it rises in affrighted obedience to the warning “kuck, kuck, kuck” of some old patriarch of his tribe; of the tramps over stubble and turnips in “the

golden harvest time;" of the cheery sound of the horn, and the joyous music of hounds' voices on a dull November day, "when the face of all nature looks black," and when the flash of scarlet is reduced by the exigencies of time and pace into one "thin, red line," and the powerful swinging stride of a well-bred horse seems carrying us away from all trouble and sorrow for ever.

Hark! was he really dreaming? And that sound now trembling on the still night air, was it only the wailing bark of a hungry jackal prowling around? Colonel Dering stirred restlessly, and looked anxiously out across the desolate moonlit plain, but all to no purpose; and, with a sigh of impatience, he once more resumed his waking dream.

A change had come o'er its spirit now, and he thought of his dead wife lying at

rest in her quiet grave under the Neilgherry Hills; poor little Rosabel, who had drifted out of life as happily and aimlessly as she had drifted through it. He thought, too, of the woman who had so loyally helped him to make that same feeble and aimless life at least a happy one; and he blessed her in his heart even as he had done oftentimes before, ever since that “long, long ago.”

It would indeed be passing strange if he thought not of *her* to-night. Might not each minute now bring the long expected messenger from a station which was distant but a day's march, and to where his letters had been forwarded, one at least of which would bring him a moral life or death. Which would it be? And over and over again he repeated to himself the few short lines whose answer was now to come: “Write me one line,

Cecil, to say if I may come home. If it be 'yes,' then shall I start for England without so much as one hour's delay ; if it be 'no,' I dare not even think of what the future will be to me ! ”

Yes ! surely that rapid, regular beat can be but one thing on earth, the stroke of a horse's hoofs at full gallop ? And Colonel Dering rises eagerly to his feet as the sound draws nearer and nearer, and the moonlight now plainly reveals an advancing figure on horseback. The sleepers arouse themselves to bid a low welcome to the new-comer, who, after handing a packet of letters to his colonel, leads his panting little flea-bitten Arab away ; and Alan Dering stands there alone with an open letter in his hand and in his eyes the light of a dawning happiness, unfathomable as the sea.

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On this self-same night, at this very hour, the turbulent North Sea is dashing itself high in foaming wrath against the cliffs of Ercildoun; and the grey, ivy-covered towers look more desolate and weird than ever, as they rear their heads above it in stately pride, each turret shining like silver under the rays of the harvest moon.

All is still, save for the clamour of the sea-birds, which rest not day or night, and the ceaseless sound of many waters; all is dark in the old building, too, save for one light brightly burning in the ruined chapel which overhangs the sea, the last resting-place of ill-fated Hélène, Lady Ercildoun.

Far out at sea the fishermen see the light, and murmur to each other in superstitious fear, "It is the lady who still keeps watch and ward, praying for her lover's return from over the sea."

Perhaps there was greater truth in their low-muttered words than they dreamt of in their philosophy; for a woman with pale, noble face kneels before the altar there, praying to meet *him* once again, who must cross so many a weary mile of land and sea ere his hand clasps her own once more.

* * * * *

One more vision, and then the tale is nigh told.

The scene lies in the sunny Rhineland, where vineyards crown the slope of each hill, and meek-eyed dun cattle browse in the fields, and rosy, flaxen-haired children laugh and cry with each alternating moment's fate.

But a sad and dreary change has come over the sunny landscape now; the vines are torn down and lie ruthlessly trampled;

the meek-eyed dun cattle have been confiscated by the foe; the children have fled, or else have no longer the heart to laugh and play.

Truly, "an enemy hath done this." And it is the result of deadly hatred and national animosity which fills that roughly organized military hospital on yonder hill with wounded and dying soldiers.

For the Franco-German war is at its height. Within a dozen miles from this very place the "Red Prince's" heavy cuirassiers only yesterday have utterly annihilated a small band of heroic men, fighting to the last against overwhelming odds in defence of their tri-coloured flag. That flag, torn and rent, is now in the hands of their enemies; and they, too, almost as torn and rent as itself, are lying wounded or dead in a military hospital in this sunny Rhineland.

The hospital wards are crowded to suffocation this same evening, and endless rows of hastily arranged beds are filled with an indiscriminate mass of wounded soldiers of either nation, and of all ages. Many are silent enough; some, sleeping the sleep of returning convalescence,—*some*, the sleep that knows no waking.

Here, the rough-bearded face of an Uhlan raises itself up from the pillow in dire agony, and wondering vaguely at the calm stillness of the comrade who lies beside him, a trumpeter in the light cavalry brigade, for whom the last call has already sounded. There, a delicate-looking boy in his teens, the little drummer of a French light infantry regiment, calls aloud on his mother's name in heart-rending accents, and yet not even her beloved face could have looked down

on his sufferings with more loving tenderness than can be read in the beautiful, dark face of the woman who now bends over him. And when, soothed and tranquil, his cries die away in sleep at last, she who has tended him so long and so unweariedly, crosses over to a bed whereon lies the sleeping form of a little peasant child, accidentally trodden underfoot by some restive troop-horse, and throwing herself down on the floor by its side, she pillows her tired head against the little one's couch, and sinks into the dreamless rest of utter exhaustion.

All night long the moans and cries continue to resound at fitful intervals, but towards morning's dawn everything becomes more still; and when the hospital surgeon, accompanied by what small assistance he can procure in his arduous work, comes to go his rounds,—a strange

sight greets him in one corner of that great fever-stricken ward.

A ray of bright sunshine lights up the curly golden hair of a little child, sitting upright in its bed, with the light of returning health in its blue eyes, and a half-smile on its rosy lips; another ray, gleaming through the high, narrow hospital window, rests lovingly on the dead, still face of a weary woman, to whom death has brought peace at length; for verily to Madge Lee has the "good time" come at last!

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE GLOAMING.

“ Will they forget us when we drop behind them ?
When we have done with fair and stormy weather ?
When there is nothing further to remind them
Of all we thought, and did, and spoke together ? ”

“ In the gloaming, oh, my darling, when the lights are dim
and low,
And the quiet shadows falling, softly come and softly go,
When the winds are sobbing faintly with a gentle, un-
known woe,
Will you think of me, and love me, as you did once long
ago ? ”

Two months later, and towards the close of a dull autumn day, Colonel Dering was sitting by the fire in the billiard-room at Beechwarden, with much the same expression on his face as it had worn when last we saw him waiting and watching.

But it was a happier face which turned

to greet Mary Graham as she entered the room shortly after, though still it wore the self-same look of eager unrest, a look which would probably rest there for ever now, until Alan Dering's dream should be fulfilled.

Mrs. Graham and her daughter were Colonel Dering's guests at present, having principally come to play the joint part of hostess and chaperon to all whom it might concern, and on the strength of this, a hurried telegram had been dispatched to Lady Ruthven at Ercildoun, begging her to come and join them all at Beechwarden without a minute's delay. Riverside having again been let, rendered this arrangement the best for all concerned.

"I've got a telegram from Cecil *at last!*" exclaimed Mary Graham, bustling into the room with effusion.

“What does she say?” Colonel De-ring’s face looked lined with a strange, wistful anxiety, which spoke of a strength of love and longing known to himself alone.

“That she will be here now very soon. It seems, her first telegram was never sent off, through some mistake; for this one, you see, has been despatched from W——, and that is only two hours’ journey from Heversham.”

“Then she may be here any moment,” observes Alan, in a dazed, wondering tone, which causes Mary Graham to glance at his face curiously.

But she can read nothing there, and goes on speaking presently—

“I took the liberty of speaking to Mrs. Keys, Alan, as I came to this room, just to beg her to get Cecil’s rooms ready at once. Was that right?”

“Quite right,” answers her companion, in the same dreamy, absent tone. He was thinking how strange it seemed that Lady Ruthven should be coming to stay with *him*.

Mary thinks to herself, “Well, he doesn’t seem to care as much as I thought, so perhaps they never mean to be anything but friends after all,” and goes away quite disappointed at the failure which her news has after all proved.

“Mother,” she said, seating herself by the fire in the drawing-room, and arousing that estimable old lady from a siesta, the more sweet because stolen, “do you know, I almost think we were all wrong in believing that Alan and Cecil would ever care a bit about each other.”

“My dear, what makes you think so?” inquired Mrs. Graham, in the dismayed

tone suitable to a national misfortune. It was very evident that these two ladies had been plotting for such an event assiduously.

“Why, when I went in a great hurry to tell Alan just now that Cecil had accepted, in fact would be here very soon, he didn’t look a bit glad,” said Mary, indignantly.

“Perhaps he *felt* glad, though,” observed Mrs. Graham meekly; and her remark irresistibly suggested the idea that “a post sometimes points out the right road.”

“I always thought that Cecil Ruthven seemed cut out to be Alan’s wife,” maundered on the old lady, addressing her remarks partly to her daughter, as the latter wandered restlessly about the large room, and partly to her own knitting-needles; “and I never could see what

made him marry my niece, Rosabel, never ! ”

“ Poor Rosabel ! ” sighed Mary. “ Neither her brother nor herself were fated ever to enjoy this grand old place ; it seems hard.”

“ My dear, it can’t be in better hands than it is,” responded the old lady, always keen in defence of Alan Dering, for whom her liking had only grown stronger with successive years.

“ I don’t say it could, mother,” said Mary, smiling ; “ only it makes me sad to think of that handsome young brother and sister dead and gone, poor things ! ”

“ Mary,” and Mrs. Graham pushed up her spectacles in her excitement, and spoke in a tragic, half fearful whisper, “ Mary, do tell me, my dear, what became of *her* ? ”

“ Of whom, mother ? ”

“Of her—of she—I mean of Madge Lee,” stammered the old lady, with a prim mixture of modesty and desire for knowledge.

Mary had no such modest scruples, and spoke out frankly, “She’s in heaven, mother, if anybody is, I think.”

“Oh, my dear, you mustn’t say that,” exclaimed poor Mrs. Graham, aghast. Kindly and good as her nature was, she had a code of her own on such subjects, a code which admitted not of black sheep mingling with the white.

“Well, it shall be as you like, mother dear,” said Mary, quietly; “but *I* shall keep my faith in that idea through all time. Poor Madge Lee! how hard she worked to redeem the past, when Cecil Ruthven got her started as nurse in that London hospital.”

Poor Madge, indeed! Even now she

is not credited with the truth and honour which so surely should have been hers !

“ And when and where did she die, my dear ? ” asked Mrs. Graham half fearfully, for the subject was to her as alarming as it was engrossing.

“ At E——, a little village in Germany, and only about a month ago, mother. They had arranged a rough sort of hospital there for all the poor wounded soldiers, but could hardly get nurses or doctors enough at first to do the work. And they say that Madge Lee worked day and night with the strength of ten, and neither fever nor any other danger had power to touch her, for she seemed to bear a charmed life. But at last the end came. There were three days of terribly hard work in that hospital, for a disastrous skirmish between the French and German regiments near there had

filled the whole place with dead and wounded; and Madge Lee never rested night or day, but worked amongst them hour after hour. And towards evening on the fourth day she complained of feeling very weary, but there was no one to take her place, and when the doctors came in the morning they found her dead, with her head resting against the bed of a little child."

"Yes, yes, my dear, she *must* be in heaven!" exclaimed Mrs. Graham, tearfully, convinced even against her strictest precepts.

"God grant it," said Mary, gently; and then, anxious to turn her mother's thoughts from such sad events, she went to the piano and began playing.

Lost in her own thoughts she played on and on, whilst the old lady dozed gently in her chair, and she played so long that

she never even heard the sound of carriage-wheels, or that of an arrival at the hall-door, which lay at the farthest extremity of the old grey mansion.

Some one else besides Mary Graham also fails to hear these sounds. Alan Dering is wrapt in dreams of the past and of the future, and so can spare no time for the present; therefore the distant clang of doors as they open and shut falls as meaninglessly on his ear as do the far-off strains of Mary's music, or even the voice of some servant speaking his master's name in the hall beyond.

But now a light, firm tread is heard crossing the adjacent room, the door opens gently, and as Alan starts up from his seat by the fire, almost he thinks himself a boy again, and returned by some strange stroke of fate to the boyish days of long ago.

By the doorway, in the light of the gloaming, stands a woman, on whose face the world has set its seal in giving to it an expression of deeper and nobler thought than perhaps had once been there ; but in little else is she changed from the Cecil Ruthven of long ago. The same half-proud, half-shy glance is there now, with which she had first met Alan Dering's gaze in the Grahamstown garden so many years gone by ; the same royally fearless eyes meet his again, which urged him on to duty and to right when the strife was sore and the struggle long.

“ Alan, you wanted me, and so I have come,” says a low, clear voice, the echoes of which have so often closed Alan Dering's ears to all other music.

“ At last ! Oh, my darling, my dream has come true at last ! ” exclaims a deep, passionate voice in answer, as Alan

Dering's arms close round her fast and sure ; whilst a tender, dreamy strain of music comes floating down from the far-off distance in echo of his low, murmured words, " Mon rêve, mon rêve ! "

THE END.





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